



THE NEW SHOFAR

The power of the Church to change the world comes from a community commitment, not just that of the few

Advent 2

Cyprian: the Bishop they needed for the time

When St Cyprian (250 A.D.) was the Bishop of Carthage (North Africa), he was ministering to a Church beset with more problems than we could ever imagine today. There were internal squabbles and divisions among Christians, and they found themselves living in a pause between waves of persecution and martyrdom. Christians were struggling to keep their faith alive and to find hope for their future as believers. His Church communities were made up of those who had suffered much and wanted revenge against those who had tormented them. There were also many who had given up on God altogether and had “gone over” to the world of pagan worship. They struggled to find work and were still not accepted as a part of the wider society. It would not be an overstatement to say that for Christ’s disciples, the world truly had seemed to be out of control.

What was Cyprian’s response? As their shepherd he wanted to keep them true to their tradition. For the Bishop, this meant living out, in uncompromising ways, the faith they proclaimed: Jesus Christ was Lord. He lived, died, rose, reigns and will return again in glory. For him it was essential that they lived this message visibly and faithfully, live it in such obvious ways that outsiders would see and experience what the Christians were all about. In experiencing Christ living in the community, they would then be attracted to join them. And remember, this was also a period of massive expansion for the Church. Their experience: the hardships associated with believing made them stronger and more attractive to others. **Important note:** There was no mention of overt evangelism here. Just a focus on truly living what they proclaimed.

Christians are those who live what they profess

What Cyprian wrote to his community encouraged this kind of thinking...*Beloved brethren, we are philosophers not in words but in deeds; we exhibit our wisdom not by our dress but by truth; we know virtues by their practice rather than through boasting of them; we do not speak great things - but we live them.*

The challenge for the Church was not to deal with those seeking to destroy them. The true challenge was to live their faith, making it visible, demonstrating the Gospel to a world that was watching them. They needed to illustrate why it was beneficial for them and for society as a whole to take on Kingdom living. It was a case of “look at

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what it has done for us"... "you too can have these blessings if you have faith in Christ". This is the message paramount in Cyprian's writings and preaching.

What does that mean for us?

If you type "Church mission" into the search engine of a computer and look for books on this topic, you will end up with tens of thousands of hits. Why? Because the Western Church is in a state of panic. Numbers have fallen away and so many of our congregations are in danger of disappearing. Many of us search in vain for young people and families in our pews. When the consequences of this decline become more and more apparent, we search for a "why". We also want a quick fix to the problem.

The "why" is important because we must have someone to blame. That "someone" is the world out there. They are godless and not interested in change. The "how" of revitalization comes in many forms, as many as there are experts, priests and bishops convinced of the way forward...*if we would only do this, or that, or something else* all would be well. And of course, none of them work as promised. Our parish files are littered with pastoral plans, diocesan plans, mission plans and plans for making more plans! Many of them unread. Few of them tried and nothing to show apart from fancy titles, months of anxiety and infighting.

The Church cannot legislate its way to a new and reinvigorated life

Imposing new structures and new directions has never worked and will never work. Experience and scholarship shows clearly how the role of diocesan law is to enable things to happen, to free up its structures to allow for new directions to be explored. Down the track some time there may be need for something more concrete, but in the beginning, much more direction needs to be handed over to the Spirit, and that is scary.

In Acts 2 Luke notes how believers *devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer...⁴⁶ Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God...* Nothing here but a passion for what Cyprian wrote of as being essential. **Note** there is no mission or evangelism mentioned here. All they did was live their baptismal commitments in ways that the world could see, hear and experience. As Christian living transformed them, more and more people were added to their community. Not by their own efforts but by *the Lord*. Outsiders loved, respected and admired them because of how they were living.

This is the challenge of Advent 2

For the Church Fathers, it is God who grows the Church from the seeds planted by the living witness of the faithful. If the Church is not growing, or is in decline or trouble, the reasons are obvious – a failure to live in the way Jesus taught us to be living. If we want to know what that "way" demands of us, we need only to read Matthew chapters 5-7. That is **THE** mission plan par excellence. It is the plan of Jesus Himself.

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