

Research Article

The Unity of the Church and Episcopal Authority in the Thought of Cyprian of Carthage

Yosef Gunawan^{1*}, Ambrose Naomi Mkyahola²

¹ Sanata Dharma University, Indonesia, e-mail: wawanyosep28@gmail.com

² Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, Kenya,
e-mail: naomimkyaholaambrose2016@gmail.com

* Corresponding Author: e-mail : wawanyosep28@gmail.com

Abstract: This article examines the theological thought of Saint Cyprian of Carthage, one of the third-century Church Fathers, within the context of the Church's situation in his time, which was marked by profound struggles of faith, particularly the experience of persecution. The focus of the discussion is directed toward the historical and pastoral conditions that shaped Cyprian's views on the unity of the Church, episcopal authority, and the validity of the sacrament of baptism. Accordingly, this article raises several key questions: What historical background formed Cyprian's thinking on these three concepts? What were the central ideas he developed regarding ecclesial unity, episcopal authority, and baptism? And how are his ideas relevant to the Church's teaching, especially in light of the Second Vatican Council? Using a historical and hermeneutical approach, this article traces Cyprian's life background as well as his pastoral-theological responses to the concrete situations faced by Christians in his time. In the context of the post-persecution crisis, Cyprian played a significant role in addressing internal divisions within the Church, particularly debates concerning the readmission of the *lapsi* (those who had apostatized). From these struggles, it becomes evident how Cyprian firmly articulated the role of bishops as successors of the apostles and emphasized the sacrament of baptism as the legitimate gateway into ecclesial communion. Based on the historical background of Cyprian's thought and these three central themes, the article then examines the contribution of Cyprian's theology to the teachings of the Church as formulated in the Second Vatican Council. Thus, Cyprian's thought is understood not only as a foundation of early ecclesiology, but also as a living source of faith reflection that remains relevant for the contemporary Church in responding to the dynamics and challenges of the modern age

Keywords: Cyprian of Carthage; Ecclesiology; Episcopal Authority; Sacrament of Baptism; Unity of the Church.

Received: September 25, 2025

Revised: November 09, 2025

Accepted: December 25, 2025

Online Available: January 23, 2026

Curr. Ver.: January 23, 2026



Copyright: © 2025 by the authors.

Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY SA) license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>)

1. Introduction

After the death of the disciples of Jesus, the teachings they had handed down were continued and further developed by the Fathers of the Church. These Church Fathers were disciples of the apostles or of the subsequent generation and served as direct successors of the apostolic tradition (Ilarius, 2025: 215–222). When one examines the teachings of the Church today it can be said that a substantial part of its foundation was shaped by the theological thought of the early Church Fathers. Emerging within the context of the early Church, they sought to understand, articulate, and defend the faith inherited from the apostles. They were the first to lay down the basic structures, doctrinal principles, and pastoral guidelines of the Church, many of which remain relevant to this day (Widodo, 2023: 2). Their efforts to interpret and formulate apostolic teaching were always closely connected to the concrete situations of the communities of their time. Some were motivated by the needs of

the faithful who sought a correct understanding of Christian revelation, while others were compelled to confront the emergence of heretical teachings.

This theological development cannot be separated from the life of the earliest Christian community itself. In an effort to understand and spread the teachings of Jesus, the disciples began to gather regularly for prayer, the breaking of bread, and mutual instruction based on their experiences with the Teacher (Acts 2:42). This early community, often referred to as the *ekklesia* or the Church, grew not only in numbers but also in spiritual depth and social commitment. They lived in close fellowship, shared their possessions, and manifested concrete expressions of love distinctive characteristics that made Christianity appealing within a society marked by injustice and fragmentation. Gradually, the faith that was initially centered in Jerusalem expanded to Judea, Samaria, and ultimately to the ends of the earth, in accordance with Jesus' mandate before His ascension (Acts 1:8). However, the spread of the Christian faith was accompanied by significant challenges. The early Church faced persecution from Roman authorities, internal tensions concerning Christian identity particularly whether Christianity should remain bound to Jewish customs or be open to non-Jewish believers—and the rise of heretical teachings that obscured the core of the Gospel. Yet, it was precisely through these struggles that the identity of the Church became more clearly defined. Through apostolic letters, early councils, and the witness of martyrs, the Church gradually articulated firm foundations of faith that would later form the basis of Christian doctrine.

Within this historical and ecclesial context, Saint Cyprian of Carthage (c. 200–258 AD) emerged as one of the most significant figures among the Church Fathers. Serving as a bishop in North Africa during the third century, Cyprian exercised leadership amid a profound internal crisis, particularly in the aftermath of the Decian persecution. During this persecution, many Christians known as the *lapsi* (the fallen) renounced their faith in order to preserve their lives. When the persecution subsided, a pressing theological and pastoral question arose: could those who had apostatized be readmitted into the communion of the Church, and under what conditions? In response, Cyprian demonstrated leadership that was both firm and compassionate. He insisted on the necessity of sincere repentance and reconciliation carried out through the legitimate authority of the Church, rather than through private or irregular practices that could endanger ecclesial unity. Beyond his pastoral leadership, Cyprian made a profound theological contribution to the Church's understanding of its own nature. In his renowned work *De Unitate Ecclesiae* (*On the Unity of the Church*), he articulated the principle *salus extra Ecclesiam non est* “there is no salvation outside the Church.” This assertion underscores Cyprian's conviction that the Church, as the visible Body of Christ, constitutes the divinely ordained means through which God's grace is mediated to humanity.

Taken together, Cyprian of Carthage stands as a central figure among the Church Fathers who not only preserved the apostolic tradition but also actively shaped the Church's identity during a period of profound crisis. Like other early theologians, he did not develop his theology in abstraction, but in direct response to concrete historical and pastoral challenges. His theological vision emerged from lived struggles—crises of faith caused by persecution, internal divisions, and threats to ecclesial unity. Therefore, to appreciate Cyprian's contribution fully, this study examines the historical and pastoral background that

shaped his thought and explores his key ideas concerning the Church, repentance, and sacramental authority. Such an exploration is intended not only to provide historical insight but also to offer a foundation for contemporary faith reflection, so that Cyprian's theological legacy rooted in fidelity to apostolic tradition and sensitivity to the needs of the faithful remains relevant in strengthening the Church's identity and mission within the complexities of the modern world.

2. Proposed Method

This study employs a qualitative approach, namely an approach that examines the quality of relationships, activities, situations, and various social phenomena by emphasizing a holistic form of description. This approach enables the researcher to explain in depth the processes, dynamics, and contexts of the phenomena under investigation (Ultavia, Jannati, & Malahati, 2023:347). The qualitative approach is chosen because the focus of this research is directed toward an analysis of the thought of a particular figure and its relevance to the teachings of the Catholic Church, especially within the context of the Second Vatican Council. This research specifically focuses on the thought of Cyprian of Carthage, particularly with regard to the unity of the Church, the authority of the Magisterium, and the validity of the sacrament of baptism. Therefore, this study is conceptual in nature, and data collection is not carried out through field research but through a library research method. The primary data used in this study consist of books and scholarly articles that discuss the thought and works of Cyprian of Carthage. Through a critical examination of these sources, this research seeks to deepen understanding of Cyprian's thought, beginning with its historical and theological background, moving to the principal ideas he articulated, and finally to his contributions to the development of Catholic Church teaching, particularly as reflected in the Second Vatican Council. Accordingly, this study is expected to provide a comprehensive and systematic account of the relevance of Cyprian's thought within the context of contemporary Church theology.

3. Results and Discussion

The Background of Cyprian of Carthage's Thought

Cyprian of Carthage came from an upper-class family in Carthage, a Roman province in (North) Africa (Ferguson, 2016: 81). He was born around AD 200. His youth was spent in an atmosphere of luxury; however, upon reaching adulthood he experienced a conversion and was baptized in AD 246, at the age of thirty-five. Owing to his intellectual abilities and leadership qualities, he was ordained Bishop of Carthage in AD 248. At the time of his episcopate, the Church was undergoing severe persecution under the Roman Empire during the reign of Emperor Gaius Messius Quintus Decius (AD 249–251). Christians were targeted because they refused to offer sacrifices to the Roman gods. In this situation, some believers remained steadfast in their faith, even to the point of losing their lives, while others chose to renounce their faith in order to escape persecution. There were also those who obtained certificates indicating that they had offered sacrifices, even though they had not actually done so.

In early AD 250, Cyprian went into hiding, believing that as a prominent Christian his presence could become a focal point of hostility within the community; nevertheless, from his place of concealment he was able to govern his diocese more effectively (Sykes, 2004: 21). After the persecution ended, those who had apostasized (*lapsi*), namely those who

had offered sacrifices to the Roman gods, sought to be readmitted into the communion of the Church. This situation generated a new controversy, as debates arose over whether the Church should accept back those who had denied the faith or reject them on the basis of their transgression (Atmadjaja, 2025: 3). At least three groups with differing positions emerged at that time: the Catholic party (loyal to the Pope), the rigorist party, and the laxist party (Viktorahadi, 2021: 5).

The rigorist party, led by Novatian, insisted that the Church should no longer accept the *lapsi*, since they were considered to have committed a grave sin against the Church. On the other hand, the laxist party, led by Novatus and Felicissimus, argued that the Church should adopt a merciful stance, forgiving and restoring those who had fallen, especially those who had apostatized under pressure or persecution. Between these two extreme positions, the Catholic party led by Cyprian took a middle path. Cyprian affirmed that the *lapsi* could indeed be readmitted, provided that they demonstrated genuine repentance and honestly confessed their sins. For Cyprian, the extreme positions of both the rigorists and the laxists were dangerous, as they threatened the unity of the Church. Both groups tended to act according to their own judgments and thus risked creating division (schism). Whereas apostates endangered their own salvation by separating themselves from the communion of the Church, schismatics were far more dangerous because they could damage and disrupt the unity of the Catholic Church.

In this regard, other sources indicate that before Cyprian succeeded in easing the debate within the community, he himself initially experienced uncertainty in determining his stance toward the *lapsi*. This group wielded significant influence within the Christian community in Carthage and likely consisted of individuals of relatively high economic status. Some of them had even obtained recommendations from confessors or certain congregations for their immediate readmission into ecclesial communion (Sykes, 2004: 23). After the controversy subsided, a council was eventually convened in AD 251 to address the issue of the readmission of the *lapsi* into the Catholic Church. The council decreed that those who had truly offered sacrifices to pagan gods could only be readmitted when facing imminent danger of death. Meanwhile, those who merely possessed certificates without actually performing the sacrifices could be reconciled with the Church on the basis of the repentance they had undertaken.

Beyond the various challenges Cyprian faced in Carthage, he later became involved in a dispute with the Church of Rome concerning the validity of baptisms administered outside the Catholic Church, particularly in relation to the *lapsi*. This dispute arose as a consequence of the schism in Rome over Church policy toward those who had lapsed. The Roman Church recognized baptisms performed outside the Catholic community, provided that the recipients underwent the rite of the laying on of hands as a sign of reconciliation. By contrast, Cyprian rejected the validity of such baptisms. His rejection was grounded in the decision of the African Council of AD 251, which affirmed the belief that baptism that is, the forgiveness of sins through the work of the Holy Spirit could only be conferred through the Church, understood as the sole possessor of the Holy Spirit. This dispute was never fully resolved, for in AD 257 persecution erupted once again. In this situation, Cyprian was first exiled and later returned to Carthage, where he ultimately suffered martyrdom in AD 258.

Cyprian's Ecclesiological Ideas

Starting from this problem, Cyprian put forward several important ideas as responses to the polemics that threatened the life of the Church. First, he emphasized the Church and its unity (*unitas Ecclesiae*). In explaining the meaning of ecclesial unity, Cyprian employed the image of the Church as **a Mother** and the argument *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. The concept of the Church as a mother is expressed in one of his most famous statements: "He cannot have God as his Father who does not have the Church as his Mother" (Damian, 2013:94). This metaphor seeks to affirm that the Church is the place where the faith of believers is born, nurtured, and developed. Therefore, anyone who separates himself from the Church cuts himself off from the very source of faith. Moreover, in dealing with those who had lapsed from the Church, Cyprian used the argument *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* to stress that salvation is obtained only insofar as a person remains steadfast in the faith. It can be said that this doctrine is distinctly ecclesiological in character and apologetic in its intent, directed against internal groups within the Church that threatened ecclesial unity at that time (Atmadjaja, 2025:6).

Second, Cyprian reaffirmed the authority of the bishop as the holder and guardian of the Church's teaching. When internal conflicts rendered the unity of the Christian community fragile, Cyprian maintained that recognition of and obedience to the bishop constituted a fundamental requirement for preserving the unity of the Church. He held this view because bishops are the direct successors of the apostles, who from the beginning functioned as the official ministers and teachers of the Church, just as local churches were originally founded by the apostles themselves. On this basis, the communion of the local Christian community must be led by a bishop. However, according to Cyprian, the leadership of a bishop within a local church must not be understood in an individualistic sense. Although a bishop possesses authority over his community, he must remain conscious of his equality with other bishops, who are likewise successors of the apostles. A bishop does not stand alone, and his ministry cannot be regarded as a "personal right," but rather as part of the one episcopate handed down by the apostles and exercised collectively for the sake of safeguarding the unity of the Church (Jovanović, 2018:23).

Third, Cyprian addressed the validity of the sacrament of baptism. In Africa during Cyprian's time, there were individuals who had previously adhered to heretical sects and later wished to join the Catholic Church. Cyprian was willing to receive them, yet he did not recognize their baptism as valid (Grzywaczewski, 2015:2). He argued forcefully that baptism possesses validity only when it is administered within the Church and in proper communion with the Church. For Cyprian, no form of baptism whatsoever including baptism of blood (martyrdom) could bring salvation if a person remained outside the Church. Even if someone confessed Christ and died as a martyr, if he belonged to a heretical or schismatic group, such an act had no soteriological value. According to Cyprian, such persons died not as martyrs of the Church, but as those separated from the body of Christ. In his argumentation, Cyprian depicted heretics as those who live and die "outside the Church," and therefore lack communion with Christ. Because they lack communion with Christ, they cannot attain salvation, even if outwardly they confess Christ or suffer for His name. From this perspective, it becomes clear that Cyprian directly linked the validity of baptism to the

unity of the Church.

Contributions to Theology and the Second Vatican Council

By taking into account the background of Cyprian's thought and the key ideas outlined above, the author maintains that there are several significant contributions to the teaching of the Catholic Church, especially in the areas of theology and the Second Vatican Council. These contributions can be described as follows:

Soteriology in the Catholic Church

The theology of salvation *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* in Cyprian's thought indeed appears exclusive. This is because, in his view, salvation could be obtained only when a person belonged to the community of the Catholic Church. Salvation seemed to be present only within the circle of the Catholic Church, while outside of it there was no salvation. Yet this perspective of Cyprian in fact had a positive impact on the development of theological teaching in the Church, particularly in discussions on salvation.

In contemporary Christianity, salvation always refers to Jesus Christ, since Jesus Christ is the fullness of salvation, for in Him is contained the total self-revelation of God (Martasudjita, 2013:16). However, salvation is no longer understood in an exclusive sense as it was in Cyprian's time. Rather, salvation is understood in a more open manner, namely as accessible also to those who do not yet know or explicitly believe in Jesus. This is affirmed in *Lumen Gentium* article 16, which states: "...those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience, may attain eternal salvation...".

The teaching of the Second Vatican Council, as described above, cannot be used as a justification for Christians to abandon their faith. On the contrary, both through the teaching of Saint Cyprian and through the Second Vatican Council, the Church invites Catholics to remain ever more steadfast in faith in Jesus Christ as the center of salvation. Faith is understood as a fitting and free response to God's initiative in addressing, accompanying, and calling humanity into communion of life with Him (Gula et al., 2022:84). From this perspective, faith possesses a profound soteriological dimension. When a person believes, he or she not only acknowledges the truth of God's revelation, but also participates in God's saving work itself, since this divine invitation is inherently salvific. Through revelation and God's self-disclosure in history, especially in the person of Jesus Christ, humanity is offered the path toward full unity and communion with God (Martasudjita, 2003:145). Thus, theologically speaking, salvation can be experienced when a person perseveres in faith and remains united with God.

The Magisterium as the Teaching Authority of the Church

For Cyprian, the bishop was the person capable of resolving problems that arose within the Christian community, especially when the faithful were confronted with disputes concerning Church teaching. The bishop functioned as a guide who corrected errors and offered solutions, so that the faithful would not fall into deviant teachings but would remain rooted in the truth of faith. This view of Cyprian constitutes a major contribution to the contemporary Catholic Church as well.

Catholic teaching affirms that the Pope and the bishops are the custodians of Church doctrine. They are referred to as the Magisterium. The term *Magisterium* derives from the Latin *magister*, which in its specific sense means teacher or instructor. Accordingly, in its historical development, the Magisterium has increasingly been understood as a term designating the role and authority of teaching (Sullivan, 2002:29). In the Catholic Church, the Magisterium is understood in a strict sense as the teaching authority possessed by the Pope and the bishops. This is evidenced in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, particularly *Lumen Gentium* article 20, which states that they are regarded as successors of the apostles who lead the communities, shepherd them, and serve as teachers of the faith. Thus, the image of the Pope and the bishops that we see today is that of Peter and the apostles, those who continue to hand on the teaching that Jesus entrusted to them.

Within the universal Catholic Church, the teaching of the Magisterium does not arise from the unilateral decisions of an individual bishop. Each bishop, although possessing teaching authority in his own diocese, exercises this task always in hierarchical communion with the Pope as Bishop of Rome and with the other bishops. This unity underscores that teaching authority in the Church is collegial rather than individual. Consequently, authentic magisterial teaching emerges from the college of bishops acting together with the Pope as its head (Tolo, 2024:19). Furthermore, the Church emphasizes that the teaching authority of the Magisterium does not stand on its own or apart from the sources of the Church's faith. This authority is exercised in deep fidelity to Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture as the one deposit of faith (*depositum fidei*), and in full openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit who continually accompanies the Church throughout history. In this way, the Magisterium does not create new truths, but authentically interprets, safeguards, and proclaims the truths of faith revealed by God.

Within this framework, the role of the Pope and the bishops becomes crucial as servants of the truth of faith rather than its masters. They are called to ensure that the teaching transmitted to the People of God remains faithful to the apostolic heritage and does not deviate from the authentic faith of the Church. Through the function of the Magisterium, the Church preserves the continuity of faith from the time of the apostles to the present, so that the faithful may live and grow in the same, authentic, and integral faith throughout the ages.

Theology of the Sacrament of Baptism

Human beings can never detach themselves from their relationship with God or from the symbolic mediation of His presence, since the deepest calling of humanity is to live in communion with God. In the tradition of the Church, the sacraments serve as tangible signs of this relationship, and the sacrament of baptism occupies a particularly central place. Baptism is understood as the gateway to the entire spiritual wealth of the Church, namely the grace of salvation from God through Jesus Christ, made present by the Church as the sacrament of salvation through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Through baptism, a person is incorporated into the Paschal Mystery of Christ: they die, are buried, and rise with Him; they receive the Spirit who makes them children of God, and in that Spirit they can cry out, "Abba, Father!" (Rom 8:15; *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 6) (Martasudjita, 2025:191). Baptism is not merely a symbolic rite, but a new birth that unites the human person with Christ and with the Church as His Body. This teaching is in harmony with the view of Cyprian of Carthage.

For Cyprian, baptism has a very profound meaning, because through baptism a person becomes part of the one and undivided Church. For him, there is no salvation outside the Church, since valid baptism can occur only within communion with the Church led by bishops as successors of the apostles. Baptism, according to Cyprian, is an act that concretely binds a person to Christ while at the same time planting that person within the body of the Church. Therefore, baptism not only purifies, but also binds human beings to the unity of the Church, which is the source of spiritual life.

4. Conclusion

Cyprian of Carthage's ecclesiological thought, shaped by the concrete pastoral crises of persecution, apostasy, schism, and sacramental controversy, offers a coherent vision of the Church centered on unity, communion, and salvation in Christ. Through his emphasis on *unitas Ecclesiae*, the image of the Church as Mother, the principle *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, the authority of the episcopate, and the intrinsic link between baptism and ecclesial communion, Cyprian sought to safeguard the integrity and unity of the Church against forces that threatened to fragment it from within. Although his formulations appear exclusive when viewed from a contemporary perspective, they laid an important theological foundation for later developments. The Second Vatican Council, particularly in *Lumen Gentium*, did not reject Cyprian's insights but rather reinterpreted them within a broader and more inclusive horizon, affirming Christ as the universal source of salvation while recognizing the possibility of salvation beyond the visible boundaries of the Church, and at the same time strengthening the collegial nature of episcopal authority and the sacramental understanding of baptism as incorporation into the Body of Christ. In this way, Cyprian's thought can be seen as a decisive early contribution that continues to inform and enrich Catholic theology and the ecclesiological vision articulated by the Second Vatican Council.

References

- Atmadjaja, A. H. (2025). Perbandingan doktrin *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (EENS) di zaman Siprianus dari Kartago dan Konsili Vatikan II. *FELICITAS*, 5(1), 1–11.
- Cyprian, Saint, Bishop of Carthage. (1928). *De unitate ecclesiae: The Latin text* (E. H. Blakeney, Ed.). Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; Macmillan.
- Damian, T. (2013). *The theology of St. Cyprian of Carthage: The unity of the Church and the role of the bishop*. Sophia Institute Studies in Orthodox Theology.
- Ferguson, E. (Ed.). (2016). *Understandings of the Church*. Fortress Press.
- Grzywaczewski, J. (2015). The validity of the baptism of heretics according to Cyprian of Carthage, Pope Stephen and Firmilian of Caesarea. *Vox Patrum*, 35(2), 1–18.
- Ilarius, J. A. (2025). The early Christians and their historical importance in the spread of Christianity. *International Journal of Management Studies and Social Science Research*, 7(3), 215–222. <https://doi.org/10.56293/IJMSSSR.2025.5621>
- Jovanović, Z. (2018). Cyprian's communal model of episcopal ministry and governance. *Philotheos: International Journal for Philosophy and Theology*, 18(1), 18–25.
- Martasudjita, E. (2003). *Sakramen-sakramen Gereja: Tinjauan teologis, liturgis, dan pastoral*. Kanisius.
- Martasudjita, E. (2013). *Pokok-pokok iman Gereja: Pendalaman teologis Syahadat*. Kanisius.

- Martasudjita, E. (2025). Sakramen-sakramen inisiasi: Tinjauan teologis, liturgis, dan pastoral. Kanisius.
- Shepherd, M. (1939). St. Cyprian's *De unitate*, chapter 4 in the light of the manuscripts (M. Bévenot, Ed.). *Church History*, 8, 355–375. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3160174>
- Sullivan, F. A. (2002). *Magisterium: Teaching authority in the Catholic Church*. Wipf & Stock.
- Tolo, P. (2024). Kuasa mengajar sebagai pelayanan seorang uskup. *Alternatif: Wacana Ilmiah Interkultural*, 9(1), 13–26. <https://doi.org/10.60130/JA.v9i1.7>
- Ultavia, B., Jannati, P., Malahati, F., Qathrunnada, & Shaleh. (2023). Memahami karakteristik penelitian sebagai metodologi. *Jurnal Pendidikan Dasar*, 11(2), 341–348. <https://doi.org/10.46368/jpd.v11i2.902>
- Viktorahadi, F. B. (2021). *Mengoreksi extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Kanisius.
- Von Rohr, J. (1967). *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus: An early congregational version*. *Church History*, 36(2), 107–121.