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The Role of "Confessor" in the Ministry of the Early Church

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"The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church." This early Christian aphorism, sometimes attributed to Tertullian, is often used to describe the function and result of martyrdoms in the early Christian communities. It tries to persuade us that the lives of those who suffered martyrdom at the hands of the authorities were not lost, but served as an inspiration to those who remained, in fact causing the church to grow and reap a greater harvest of souls.

But what of those early Christians who were arrested, interrogated, sometimes tortured, and who "confessed" the apostolic faith without losing their lives in martyrdom? Early Christian sources indicate that these persons were numerous, and that they often returned to their communities, assumed the title of *confessor*, and occupied positions of influence and leadership in the young churches. In this paper we will look at several early sources, to discover how these confessors, who wielded considerable spiritual and moral authority on account of their ordeals, were included in the developing hierarchy of the church's leadership. We will compare three documents, to see how they deal with the presence of confessors, their role in the church, and their relation to the "normally" ordained clergy. We will examine *The Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, and the document by Cyprian of Carthage called *Letter 38*.

The Shepherd of Hermas

This document, an apocalyptic treatise written probably in Rome about 140-154 C.E., is a series of visions allegedly reported by a certain Hermas. In the *Third Vision*, Hermas is

taken in a dream to a room containing a couch. Hermas moves to sit at the right side of the couch, but is forbidden to do so by his guide, who addresses these words to him: "You are sad, Hermas? The place at the right belongs to others who have already been pleasing to God and have suffered for his name. To sit with them, there remains much for you to do."¹ Later, the guide indicates that those on the right enjoy "a certain distinction"² because of their suffering for the faith. Although allegedly referring to the place in God's eternal kingdom prepared for those who have suffered martyrdom, various scholars have suggested that this passage also refers to the status of confessors in the church at the time and location of Hermas' writing; that is, confessors were considered to hold equal status with prophets and presbyters. Thus Burton Scott Easton states that "the correct ranks of those who occupy the 'bench' (of the clergy) are given as 'confessors, prophets, presbyters', as three distinct orders."³

Gregory Dix, although agreeing that the passage from *Hermas* is speaking of confessors, is not as certain as Easton of their temporal status: "The older Roman writer Hermas has an obscure allegorical passage of which the most likely meaning seems to be that, while confessors are not as such to be reckoned as presbyters, they will be their equals or superiors in heavenly glory."⁴ We agree with Dix here. Although the *Shepherd of Hermas* no doubt is referring to confessors in this passage, the evidence is too slim at this point to affirm that they represent an order of ministry with the same rank as presbyters and prophets.

The Apostolic Tradition

Our second document, the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, is much clearer and more helpful. In Section Nine, there is an apparently clear statement of the position of the confessor within the clerical hierarchy:

But a confessor, if he was in chains for the Lord, shall not have hands laid on him for the diaconate or the presbyterate, for he has the honour of the presbyterate by his confession. But if he is appointed bishop, hands shall be laid on him.

But if there is a confessor who was not brought before the authorities, nor punished with chains, nor shut up in prison, nor condemned to any other penalty, but has only been derided on occasion

for the name of the Lord, and punished with a domestic punishment: if he confessed, let hands be laid on him for any order of which he is worthy.⁵

From this it appears that the confessor retains status equal with that of the presbyter; his suffering for the faith will be reckoned to him as equal to the imposition of hands for the presbyterate, but not equal to that of the episcopate. Furthermore, Hippolytus recognizes two levels or grades of confession, one much more demanding than the other. Although there seems to be little connection between this passage and the passage quoted above from the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the dearth in the early documents of other references to the confessors and the presbyterate has led some scholars to make a connection. Thus Easton sees a clear link between confession and the presbyterate, and draws the connection with *The Shepherd of Hermas*:

A true confessor is, *ipso facto*, a presbyter. This declaration... follows logically from the definition of a presbyter's duties: since his primary function is to bear witness to the truth, and since no witness can be more impressively borne than when in danger of death, a confessor proves that he has the spirit of the presbyterate. Hence ordination would be otiose... (comparing Hippolytus to Hermas) In Hippolytus, the prophets disappear and the confessors are merged with the "regular" presbyters.⁶

Dix is, once again, more cautious, simply observing that, "It is conceivable that it is an indication that Hippolytus is reporting a genuine second-century custom of the Roman Church which was becoming obsolete in his own day."⁷ Dix points out, further, that there had developed a theological tradition to justify this exemption of ordination for confessors:

In the later second century there had arisen a general belief (resting on Matthew 10:19-20 and Mark 13:11) that the martyrs and confessors endured their torment only by the aid of a special *charisma* of the Holy Spirit personally present with them... The "baptism of blood" could dispense with the need of sacramental baptism for the martyred catechumens. It would be no wonder if some thought that the confessor, who was believed in some sense to incarnate the suffering of Christ, and whose confession was the utterance of the Spirit within him giving him the power to suffer, was in no need of the sacramental gift of the Spirit for governing or serving the body of Christ. What is remarkable is that in the face of such ideas sacramental ordination to the *episcopate* was still regarded as absolutely necessary, even for the confessor.⁸

This appears to cast light on the acceptance of confessors as ordained presbyters. However, as Dix points out, why not then also accept them as bishops? It would be easy to pass over this question, and simply accept the equation of spirit-filled confessors with presbyters. This is the error Campenhausen makes when he says, "It is clear that the pneumatic-charismatic and the official-sacramental conceptions are here still coexisting without great difficulty."⁹ One can imagine the kind of disruption which would occur in the church during times of persecution if many confessors would present themselves to claim the presbyterate and thus overload its ranks. Hence, as Easton points out, Hippolytus' generous offer of the presbyterate to confessors was not universally extended throughout the church. The reference here is to the *Apostolic Constitutions* in their various versions:

But elsewhere the modification in *Constitutions VII, 23*, was no doubt widely accepted: the office of a confessor was one of great dignity, but it did not include its holder in the clergy. The Ethiopic compromises: a confessor is not yet a presbyter, but can claim episcopal ordination to the presbyterate as a right.¹⁰

John E. Stam, in an unpublished dissertation, also notices the confusion in the various documents, even within the textual variants of the *Apostolic Tradition*, and claims that among this confusion, only one phrase can be presumed to be genuinely original:

All the versions attest, in one form or another, the statement that the confessor "has the honour of the presbyterate by his confession." No other explicit declaration to this effect has survived in our extant patristic literature, and no other passage states directly that confessors held presbyteral status without the laying on of hands.¹¹

Does this mean that Hippolytus simply invented the tradition which states that the confessor may claim the presbyterate without the imposition of hands? Recognizing Hippolytus' conservative tendencies and faithfulness to tradition, this is hard to imagine. Furthermore, his opponent in Rome, Callistus, was himself a confessor, and one can scarcely imagine Hippolytus inventing a tradition which would enhance the status of his arch-enemy! One is driven to conclude that Hippolytus is passing along a local custom in which confessors are entitled to the presbyterate, but a custom not universally recognized by the early church. It is certainly true that martyrdom and

confessor-status are given a powerful valence in the writings of the patristic writers. As Stam observes:

Since martyrdom was an undeniable and transcendently glorious manifestation of this same pneumatic *dynamis*, it would be natural to conclude that the confessors also shared in the “Spirit of the presbyterate”. But on the other hand, the confessors, like all presbyters, must be ordained by imposition of hands in order to receive the high-priestly office and *potestas* of a bishop.¹²

So, although the clerical status of confessor seems to have varied from place to place, there is no reason to doubt that Hippolytus was accurately passing along the custom of reckoning confessors as ordained presbyters in Rome. And it may well be that this tradition had its roots in the earlier custom, observed in *The Shepherd of Hermas*, of giving confessors equal status with presbyters and prophets.

Cyprian of Carthage: Letter 38

We now turn to our third document, *Letter 38* of Cyprian. Born at Carthage around 200 C.E., Cyprian was converted to the Christian faith around 246, and became Bishop of Carthage in 248. Persecution by the Emperor Decius began about 250, which of course increased the number of confessors who identified with the church in Carthage. In the document called *Letter 38*, written while he was absent from Carthage, Cyprian addresses his people there to justify his ordination of a young confessor, Aurelius. Apart from the situation that Cyprian, a bishop, feels compelled to justify such an ordination to his people (indicating that they expect some involvement in the nomination process) this letter is of interest for several reasons:

- 1 Aurelius is a confessor.
- 2 Cyprian affirms that he *ordained* Aurelius.
- 3 Aurelius was ordained by Cyprian to the position of *lector*. Cyprian writes:

Our brother Aurelius, a distinguished young man, has already been tested by the Lord and is dear to God. In years he is still young, but in his praiseworthy virtue and faith he is already advanced. He is younger in his natural years, but older in honour. He has struggled in a double contest. He twice confessed the faith, and was twice glorified by the victory of his confession....

Such a man deserved the higher ranks of clerical ordination and greater advancement; he should be judged not by his age but by his

merits. But for the time being it seemed right that he should begin with the office of lector.

Know therefore, dear brothers, that this man was ordained by me and by those colleagues who were present. I know that you will embrace him joyfully and hope that as many such men as possible will be ordained in our church.¹³

The contrasts of this passage with Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition* are significant. First of all, Hippolytus would not require that a confessor be ordained; secondly, he is quite clear elsewhere that a lector need not be ordained at all. According to the *Apostolic Tradition*, "A reader is appointed by the bishop, giving him the book, for he does not have hands laid upon him."¹⁴ Dix sees two possibilities here:

One may interpret this either as the trace left by an older custom of reckoning confessors as presbyters *ipso facto* without ordination (now being adapted to Cyprian's sacerdotalist ideas); or as the real general rule (of which Hippolytus would give us an idiosyncratic perversion) that a confessor as such ought to be made a presbyter, but requires ordination like everyone else.¹⁵

However, as is often the case, things are more complex than they first appear. As Stam points out, during the Decian persecution, confessors in Carthage (and presumably elsewhere) were wont to abuse their charismatic privilege of enhanced status within the church. This was especially evident with respect to the traditional role of confessors as those who led penitents through reconciliation and restored them to full communion with the church. He observes that, "Cyprian reacted sharply against their abuse of it and sought to bring the discipline and restoration of *lapsi* under the control of the hierarchy."¹⁶ Thus Cyprian, as a remedy, finds it necessary to control the participation of all confessors through ordination, and even regulates entry into minor offices such as that of *lector* through ordination.

The picture of the confessors which emerges, then, is of a group of unique Christian leaders with charismatic, spirit-filled qualities who do not fit well within the normal pattern of ministry. Unlike the teachers, apostles, and prophets of earlier times, who eventually disappeared, the periodical Roman persecutions generate a new crop of confessors every now and then. These are not opposed to the official and formal ministry of the church, but neither do they fit easily and well within it.

So, what Douglas Powell says of Cyprian's situation, may also have been the case in the Rome of Hippolytus:

Thus Cyprian finds the confessors claiming an authority interwoven with rather than independent of or rival to the authority of the bishop and *clerus*. The confessor, the martyr who does not die, can neither be fitted into the system nor rejected from it as an alien element.¹⁷

With this scenario, one may speculate on two different solutions to the problem. In Rome, the *Apostolic Tradition* preserved by Hippolytus and possibly rooted in *The Shepherd of Hermas'* vision of martyrs/confessors, prophets and presbyters occupying the same bench, permits the confessor to have presbyteral status without the imposition of hands, but protects the episcopate and restricts the privileges of confessors by requiring ordination to the office of bishop. By contrast, in Carthage, possibly under Cyprian's hand, but also possibly established earlier, even minor offices such as that of lector are open to the confessor only through ordination, with the approval of the laity being a *normal* but not *necessary* prerequisite for this ordination.

Conclusion

This study has interesting implications for the study of ministry today. First, it throws into question some of the conclusions of the widely-circulated World Council of Churches *Faith & Order Paper #111*, "Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry", which stresses the historicity of the threefold ministry of deacon, presbyter, and bishop, emphasizing that "the orderly transmission of the ordained ministry is... a powerful expression of the continuity of the church throughout history."¹⁸ In fact, as we have just seen, the early church knew occasions and roles in which this transmission of ministry was not such a neat and orderly process, but which involved dealing with forms of ministry, such as that of the confessor, which were outside the typical threefold structure.

Second, some churches find themselves in a position today of having their traditional view of ministry challenged by those who do not fit the typical pattern, and by needs which cannot be fulfilled within this typical pattern. A growing body of literature is appearing which questions and addresses this issue within the Roman communion.¹⁹ The issue will also occupy

the agenda of our Lutheran churches in the near future, as they find themselves facing the questions of alternate paths to ministry, and orders other than those of presbyter and bishop. One hopes that the churches with a more structured approach to ministry will recognize that in the history of the church, there have been legitimate exceptions to the typical route to ordained ministry.

Notes

- 1 "Shepherd of Hermas" 3:1, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Francis X. Glimm, Joseph M-F Marique, SJ, and Gerald G. Walsh, SJ (New York: CIMA Publishing Co., 1947) 241.
- 2 Ibid. 242.
- 3 Burton Scott Easton, *The Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934) 82-83.
- 4 Dom Gregory Dix, "The Ministry in the Early Church," in Kenneth E. Kirk (ed.), *The Apostolic Ministry* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1946) 224.
- 5 Geoffrey Cuming (ed.), *Hippolytus: A Text for Students* (Bramcote, Nottingham: Grove Books Limited, 1976) 14.
- 6 Easton, *Hippolytus*, 81-82.
- 7 Dix, "Ministry," 224.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1969) 177.
- 10 Easton, *Hippolytus*, 82.
- 11 John E. Sattat, "Episcopacy in the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus" (Th.D. dissertation, University of Basel, Switzerland, 1969) 50-51.
- 12 Ibid. 57-58.
- 13 Cyprian of Carthage, "Letter 38," in Joseph Lienhard, SJ (ed.), *Ministry* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1984) 132-133.
- 14 Cuming, *Hippolytus*, 15.
- 15 Dix, "Ministry," 224.
- 16 Stam, "Episcopacy," 54.
- 17 Douglas Powell, "Ordo Presbyterii," *Journal of Theological Studies* 27/2 (October 1975) 315.
- 18 World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (Geneva: Faith and Order Paper #111, 1982) 44.
- 19 See, for example, "Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest," *National Bulletin on Liturgy* 21/114 (September 1988) 189-193; "Directory for Sunday Celebration in the Absence of a Priest," *National Bulletin on Liturgy*, 22/117 (June 1989) 108-120; W. Huels, "Sunday Liturgies without a Priest," *Worship* 65/5 (September 1990) 451-460;

Cyrille Vogel, "Is the Presbyteral Ordination of the Celebrant a Condition for the Celebration of the Eucharist?" in *Roles in the Liturgical Assembly: The 23rd Liturgical Conference*, trans. M. O'Connell (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co., 1977) 253-264.