

PRIESTLY ABSOLUTION
IN THE ANCIENT CATHOLIC CHURCHES
200-265 CE

Tertullian (c. 203-220 CE)

[Speaking of the forgiveness of sin after baptism:] This act [of repentance], which is more usually expressed and commonly spoken of under a Greek name, is *exomologhsis*, whereby we confess our sins to the Lord, not indeed as if He were ignorant of them, but inasmuch as by confession satisfaction is settled, of confession repentance is born; by repentance God is appeased.... [we] feed prayers on fastings, to groan, to weep and make outcries unto the Lord your God; to bow before the feet of the presbyters, and kneel to God's dear ones; to enjoin on all the brethren to be ambassadors to bear his deprecatory supplication (before God)....

Yet most men either shun [public confession], as being a public exposure of themselves, or else defer it from day to day. I presume (as being) more mindful of modesty than of salvation; just like men who, having contracted some malady in the more private parts of the body, avoid [making it known to] physicians, and so perish with their own bashfulness.... Is it better to be damned in secret than absolved in public? (*On the Lapsed* 9, 10; 203 CE)

[Later in life, Tertullian joined the Montanists—a rigorist sect that claimed that God offered no forgiveness to those who fell into sin after baptism. The following text attacks the practice of priestly absolution in Catholic churches, which did offer such forgiveness for sinners. Tertullian, in quoting the claims and criticisms of his enemies, illustrates the theology and practice of priestly absolution in Catholic churches (and those scriptures used to defend the practice) at the end of the second century CE].

[The bishop of Rome] issues an edict: “I remit, to such as have discharged (the requirements of) repentance, the sins both of adultery and of fornication.”

...

“But,” you [Catholics] say, “*the Church* has the power of forgiving sins.”... I now inquire into your opinion, (to see) from what source you usurp this right to “the Church.”

[You Catholics defend this claim, saying:] the Lord has said to Peter, “Upon this rock will I build My Church,” “to thee have I given the keys of the heavenly kingdom”; or, “Whatsoever thou shall have bound or loosed in earth, shall be bound or loosed in the heavens,” you therefore

presume that the power of binding and loosing has derived to you, that is, to every Church akin to Peter....

[Tertullian responds negatively:]...the right and arbitrage is the Lord's, not the servant's; God's Himself, not the priest's. (*On Modesty* I, XXI; c. 220 CE)

Hippolytus? (c. 215 CE[?])

[Prayer of ordination for a bishop:] Grant, Father who knows the heart, to your servant whom you chose for the episcopate, that he will feed your holy flock... in the spirit of high priesthood having the power to forgive sins according to your command; to assign lots according to your command; to loose any bond according to the authority which you gave to the apostles... through your son Jesus Christ, through whom to you be glory, power, and honor, Father and Son, with the Holy Spirit, in the Holy Church, now and throughout the ages of the ages. Amen. (*Apostolic Tradition* 3)

Origen (c. 248 CE)

“[A final method of forgiveness], albeit hard and laborious [is] the remission of sins through penance, when the sinner . . . does not shrink from declaring his sin to a priest of the Lord and from seeking medicine, after the manner of him who say, ‘I said, “To the Lord I will accuse myself of my iniquity”’” (*Homilies on Leviticus* 2:4).

Cyprian (c. 250 CE)

“For although in smaller sins sinners may do penance for a set time, and according to the rules of discipline come to public confession, and by imposition of the hand of the bishop and clergy receive the right of communion: now with their time still unfulfilled, while persecution is still raging, while the peace of the Church itself is not yet restored, they are admitted to communion, and their name is presented; and while the penitence is not yet performed, confession is not yet made, the hands of the bishop and clergy are not yet laid upon them, the Eucharist is given to them; although it is written, 'Whosoever shall eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord.'" (*To the Clergy*, 9 (16):2)

[Signed by the bishops of the African Synod at Carthage, led by Cyprian:] We had indeed decided some time ago, dearest brother [Pope St. Cornelius], having mutually taken counsel one with another, that they who, in the fierceness of persecution, had been overthrown by the

adversary, and had lapsed, and had polluted themselves with unlawful sacrifices, should undergo a long and full repentance; and if the risk of sickness should be urgent, should receive peace [absolution] on the very point of death. For it was not right, neither did the love of the Father nor divine mercy allow, that the Church should be closed to those that knock, or the help of the hope of salvation be denied to those who mourn and entreat, so that when they pass from this world, they should be dismissed to their Lord without communion and peace; since He Himself who gave the law that “things which were bound on earth should also be bound in heaven,” allowed, moreover, “that things might be loosed there” which were here first loosed in the Church.

...

Nor let any one say, “that he who accepts martyrdom is baptized in his own blood, and peace is not necessary to him from the bishop, since he is about to have the peace of his own glory, and about to receive a greater reward from the condescension of the Lord.” (Epistle LIII 1,4)

All these warnings [in 1 Cor 11 (against partaking of the Eucharist while in a state of sin)] being scorned and contemned—before their sin is expiated, before confession has been made of their crime, before their conscience has been purged by sacrifice and by the hand of the priest, before the offence of an angry and threatening Lord has been appeased, violence is done to His body and blood; and they sin now against their Lord more with their hand and mouth than when they denied their Lord.

...

Moreover, how much are they both greater in faith and better in their fear, who, although bound by no crime of sacrifice *to idols* or of certificate, yet, since they have even thought of such things, with grief and simplicity confess this very thing to God's priests, and make the conscientious avowal, put off from them the load of their minds, and seek out the salutary medicine even for slight and moderate wounds, knowing that it is written, “God is not mocked.”

I entreat you, beloved brethren, that each one should confess his own sin, while he who has sinned is still in this world, while his confession may be received, while the satisfaction and remission made by the priests are pleasing to the Lord. Let us turn to the Lord with our whole heart, and, expressing our repentance for our sin with true grief, let us entreat God's mercy. Let our soul lie low before Him. Let our mourning atone to Him. Let all our hope lean upon Him. He Himself tells us in what manner we ought to ask. "Turn ye," He says, "to me with all your heart, and at the same time with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning; and rend your hearts, and not your garments." Let us return to the Lord with our whole heart. Let us appease His wrath and indignation with fastings, with weeping, with mourning, as He Himself admonishes us. (Treatise III, *On the Lapsed*, 16,28-29)

Dionysus (the Great) of Alexandria (c. 262 CE)

There was with us a certain Serapion, an aged believer. He had spent his long life blamelessly, but had fallen in the time of trial (the persecution). Often did this man pray (for absolution), and no one gave heed to him for he had sacrificed to the idols. Falling sick, he continued three successive days dumb and senseless. Recovering a little on the fourth day, he called to him his grandchild, and said, "My son, how long do you detain me? Hasten, I entreat you, and absolve me quickly. Summon one of the presbyters to me.... The boy ran for the presbyter." (Epistle III, to the Bishop of Antioch, 11)