

San Antonio People of Faith Historical Museum

Cyprian Plague and the Emergence of a Saint

Pandemic: Worldwide spread of a new disease.

--World Health Organization

Throughout recorded history, as humans spread throughout the world, so too did infectious diseases. The greater the global growth of large cities and the establishment of more accessible trade routes, as well as the resulting disruption of ecosystems, the greater the likelihood of pandemics. From the first of upwards of 20 major pandemics recorded--the Antonine Plague (165-180 A.D.)--to the current COVID-19 Pandemic, world religions have been deeply impacted and altered by each. For Christians, these effects vary from amazing growth to the near extinction of the faith, with some religious leaders during each episode being vilified, others sanctified. To many, Christianity and the Church have survived because of the faithful who throughout these pandemics served their communities by living their faith from love rather than fear. This was evident during the second recorded pandemic known as the Cyprian Plague, which not only saw a sharp rise in conversions to Christianity, but also would result in the emergence of a saint.

Thasius Cyprianus (circa 200 A.D.-258 A.D.) was born to an affluent, pagan family in Carthage, North Africa, a thriving region of the polytheistic Roman Empire. His father was a senator who ensured that his son received the best education. While history does not record a great deal of Cyprian's childhood, it does show that as a young man he was a powerful orator, a lawyer, and a teacher of rhetoric and philosophy. He also became enthralled with Christianity and began studying Scripture. At age 46, he astounded family and friends when he was baptized, took a private vow of chastity, and gave away his wealth to the poor. In quick succession, Cyprian was ordained to the priesthood, and in 248 was elevated to Bishop of Carthage. This was a time when Church schisms and Christian persecutions abounded throughout the Roman Empire. Because of his staunch defense of and adherence to Church doctrine, he was at one point forced to flee into self-exile, from where he continued to shepherd his flock. It was during this time around Easter, 250, that a plague thought to have arisen in Ethiopia began its deadly march throughout the Roman Empire and the rest of the known world. It became known as the Cyprian Plague because of Bishop Cyprian's writings that described its horrors in intimate detail.

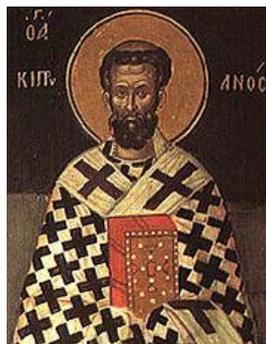
The Cyprian Plague would last for twenty years. From Cyprian's description of its symptoms, and from the scientific knowledge gained since that time, historians such as Kyle Harper believe that the pandemic was caused by a zoonotic (originating in animals and later transmitted to humans) form of a viral hemorrhagic fever much like ebola, caused by a "filovirus." "Filoviruses are millions of years old," Harper writes in *The Fate or Rome*. "They have infected bats, insectivores, and rodents. To cause an epidemic, the virus must first leap from its host species to a human." In the third century little knowledge existed regarding the contagion of infectious diseases. Most of the populace attributed the sickness to revenge of their gods. Even Christians wondered if God had inflicted the plague upon them; many, including Bishop Cyprian, thought it

marked the beginning of the end of the world. Archaeology and historical writings show mass burials, some in lime, others incinerated, that attest to the high death toll of this pandemic. Some estimate death rates of 5000 per day.

Through his writings, preaching, and his own example, Bishop Cyprian urged Christians to help everyone stricken with the plague, even their enemies and persecutors. In one sermon on morality, he sought to comfort his hearers, many of whom were then afflicted: "The pain in the eyes, the attack of the fevers, and the ailment of all the limbs are the same among us and among the others, so long as we share the common flesh of this age." He likened the strength in pain and death of "his Christians," as he called his flock, to that of the heroic martyrs. His own life ended in 258 A.D. not from the plague, but when he was beheaded for, among other adherences to Church teachings, refusing to comply with Pope Stephen's directives to recognize the validity of baptisms conferred--in Cyprian's belief--by "heretics and schismatics."

According to Kyle Harper, the Cyprian Plague marked the beginning of the decline of the Roman Empire: "The empire fragmented and only the dramatic success of later emperors in putting the pieces back together prevented this moment from being the final act of Roman imperial history." Professor John Horgan, an expert on plagues and diseases throughout world history, states, "The disease episode caused political, military, economic, and religious upheaval...Only the nascent Christian church benefited from the chaos. Christians played an active role in caring for the ill as well as actively providing care in the burial of the dead...those perishing themselves claimed martyrdom while offering non-believers who would convert the possibility of rewards in the Christian afterlife."

The San Antonio People of Faith Historical Museum invites submission of faith stories pertaining to the current pandemic we are living. These can be submitted to the museum at 1201 Donaldson, San Antonio, Texas 78228. Please call 210-733-7152 for further information.



Icon of St. Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage in North Africa from 248 A.D. until his martyrdom in 258 A.D. As with most early martyrs, no date is available for his canonization. His feast day is celebrated September 16 in the Roman Catholic Church.