

General John Stark, an American Revolutionary War hero is famous for the phrase “Live free or die: Death is not the worst of evils.” From it, New Hampshire adopted its state motto: Live Free or Die.ⁱ

In the third century when Roman Emperors were all powerful and treated like gods, Christians were often persecuted. Emperor Decius decreed that every follower of Jesus should give up their faith or die. Pope Fabian and many others were martyred. They recognized death was not the worst of evils and stayed true to the faith. Others were not as strong in their faith, and they were willing to live without freedom rather than die. Someone who renounces their faith is known as an apostate.

Emperor Decius wanted the church to die, so he prevented the church from replacing Pope Fabian. Had he consulted the church he would have had a better idea of how hard this is to do. Bishop Tertullian (~155--~240 AD) is famous for his teaching that “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”ⁱⁱ As paradoxical as it may seem, the more the church is persecuted, the more its members gain strength from their new champions in heaven.

In secret, priests met to keep the church running for better than a year. In the year 251 when the emperor left Rome to engage in battle, Cornelius was elected pope. He had the unenviable position of trying to unify the church at a time when it was deeply divided. ⁱⁱⁱ A priest named Novatian considered himself the pope and many believed as he did that those who denied the faith should not be allowed to reenter the church. Others held that a person should be accepted back without asking anything of them.

Pope Cornelius called the bishops together in synod and they reaffirmed his position as the true and legitimate pope. To further unify the church, he ruled that the apostates should be forgiven and accepted back into the Church as long as they repented and performed an adequate penance.

One of Pope Cornelius’ supporters was Cyprian of Carthage in North Africa. He became a Christian at the age of 56. The following year he was ordained a priest and two years later accepted the responsibilities of bishop. In calling for unity in the church, Cyprian argued that the faithful must accept the authority of the bishop, and the church as a whole must accept the primacy of the Bishop of Rome. He wrote:

You cannot have God for your Father if you do not have the Church for your mother.... God is one and Christ is one, and his Church is one; one is the faith, and one is the people cemented together by harmony into the strong unity of a body.... If we are the heirs of Christ, let us abide in the peace of Christ; if we are the sons of God, let us be lovers of peace.^{iv}

While one could abide in the peace of Christ, it was not easy to abide in peace in such turbulent times. In order to live freely, both were willing to die for what they believed in.

- Emperor Decius died in battle the year Cornelius became Pope.^v Within two years new persecutions began under Emperor Valerian.^{vi} Pope Cornelius was arrested and banished from Rome. He died in exile in 253.
- Cyprian had only one year of peace during his 10 years as Bishop of Carthage. Under the persecutions of Emperor Decius he went into hiding and shepherded his flock discreetly. Under Emperor Valerian he was arrested, found guilty of being a Christian and condemned to a martyr’s death in 258. When he was read his death sentence, he exclaimed “Blessed be God!”^{vii}

Saint Paul's 2nd Letter to the Corinthians speaks to the situation of these two martyrs: "We are afflicted in every way, but not constrained; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Cor 4:8-9). Strengthened by Christ and strengthened by one another, Cornelius and Cyprian helped each other to remain united in Christ and united in the faith. "Oh God, who gave Saints Cornelius and Cyprian to your people as diligent shepherds and valiant Martyrs, grant that through their intercession we may be strengthened in faith and constancy and spend ourselves without reserve for the unity of the Church."^{viii}

ⁱ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Live_Free_or_Die

ⁱⁱ yinkahdinay.wordpress.com/2017/11/07/quatable-church-history-the-blood-of-the-martyrs/

ⁱⁱⁱ loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/saints/saints-stories-for-all-ages/saints-cornelius-and-cyprian/

^{iv} catholicnewsagency.com/saint/st-cornelius-pope-martyr-and-st-cyprian-bishop-martyr-596

^v en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Decius

^{vi} [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valerian_\(emperor\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valerian_(emperor))

^{vii} loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/saints/saints-stories-for-all-ages/saints-cornelius-and-cyprian/

^{viii} Roman Missal, 3rd Edition, Sept 16, p 950.