

Saint of the Month for March 2014

(A monthly series compiled by Tom Quinlan)

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, Bishop and Doctor of the Church **Tuesday, March 18**

March 18 is a day when we usually don't think too much about other saints, with St. Patrick remembered on March 17 and Saint Joseph on March 19. However, Cyril was a key figure in early church history, and his writings provide evidence of what was taught in the 4th century.

He was born in Palestine (about 315), perhaps in Jerusalem. His parents were probably Christians, and he was certainly educated in that city. He acquired a wide knowledge of the Bible, and he made good use of that in his instructions later in life: some of his work consisted almost entirely of Scriptural passages put together and interwoven to convey his message.

He was ordained a priest by the bishop of Jerusalem, St. Maximus, and charged with the important duty of instructing the catechumens. Cyril gave his instructions for several years, both to candidates for baptism (18 lectures before Easter) and to the newly baptized (5 lectures during Easter week). These instructions (**Catecheses** in Latin or **Catechetical Discourses** in English) are almost the entire set of his writings that have come down to us- there are some fragments of others and some letters.

A very important aspect of these **Discourses** is that they give us a very good picture of what the church believed in the 4th century, and that the body of beliefs was almost the same as today's. Butler says "They are most valuable as containing an exposition of the teaching and ritual of the Church in the middle of the fourth century, and are said to be 'the earliest example extant of anything in the shape of a formal system of theology'." Cyril advanced Eucharistic theology by his interpretation of the Lord's presence in the terms of the later dogma of transubstantiation.

He succeeded St. Maximus about 350 as Bishop of Jerusalem. Cyril fostered the development of the "holy city" as a pilgrimage center for all of Christendom.

Cyril lived in troubled times- there was strife both in the church and in civil government. In 313 Constantine had made Christianity legal with the Edict of Milan, and it became the official religion. The next emperor, Constantius, his son, continued in this path, but the next emperor, Julian (called the Apostate) (361-363) reversed course and headed back to the polytheistic beliefs of earlier times. Christianity was reestablished after his death, but the turmoil was considerable.

The church was in upheaval as well. The Arian heresy was still rampant, and Cyril had to contend with its adherents. There were some complications, too, with semi-Arians who were not clearly always in one camp!

Arius was a monk from Alexandria in Egypt who maintained that Jesus was created and thus not divine. He was excommunicated in 319, and the Council of Nicea in 325 said

that Jesus was not created, and was of one substance with the Father (*homoousios* in Greek, *consubstantialis* in Latin and *consubstantial* in English). The Council of Constantinople in 381 affirmed Nicea and declared that the Holy Spirit was also consubstantial with the Father and Son. For many people, though, these official pronouncements did not close the subject, and Arians came into and out of power for centuries. Saint Cyril was exiled three times by Arian groups, starting in 357, but finally lived out the remainder of his life in Jerusalem.

He died about 386. He was declared a Doctor of the Church in 1882.

The commemoration is given the rank of Optional Memorial (it is in Lent, so the word Commemoration is often used). (**Daily Roman Missal, Third Edition** (Scepter Publishers); **Butler's Lives of the Saints, 2nd Edition** (Ave Maria Press); **Magnificat**, March 2014; **Catholic Dictionary, Revised** (Our Sunday Visitor); **Encyclopædia Britannica**, 15th Edition.

Collect from the Mass of Saint Cyril of Jerusalem:

O God, who through the Bishop Saint Cyril of Jerusalem
led your Church in a wonderful way
to a deeper sense of the mysteries of salvation,
grant us, through his intercession,
that we may so acknowledge your Son
as to have life ever more abundantly.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. (**Roman Missal, Third Edition**)

I think all of us might benefit from following in Saint Cyril's path and devoting some time to studying the **Catechism of the Catholic Church**, whether for the first time or the Nth time. I think we could all come to know our beliefs more fully and try to carry them out more closely. Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, pray for us!