

Readings: *2 Corinthians 4: 7 – 15; Psalm 125(126); John 17: 11 – 19.*

Today the Church celebrates two martyr-bishops of the mid-third century.

Cornelius became Bishop of Rome in AD 251, during a lull in the persecution of Christians, and was immediately faced with the problem of lapsed but repentant Christians, who had offered sacrifice to the Roman gods and now hoped to return to the Church. Cornelius took the compassionate line of allowing them to be readmitted after a suitable time of penance.

In the following year plague broke out in Rome and people began to blame the Christians' refusal to worship the Roman gods. Cornelius was banished from the city and then died – probably of ill-treatment – in the June of AD 253. He was immediately recognized as a martyr.

Cyprian was born in Carthage in about AD 200, at a time when there was a revival in the Church. He took a full part in civic life, becoming a student of classical writings, a teacher and a lawyer. When he was about 45 he was converted to the Christian faith by the example of an elderly priest named Caecilian. He gave up the study of pagan authors and was ordained as a priest shortly after his baptism. In AD 248 he was chosen as bishop of Carthage, and shortly afterwards the edict of Decius brought persecution to the Church in Africa as well as in Rome. Cyprian wrote to Cornelius in exile congratulating him and the whole Roman Church for their steadfastness. As in Rome, many African Christians sacrificed to the Roman gods. Cyprian took the same compassionate line as Cornelius. He himself was a wanted man and went into hiding. In his absence there was a move to readmit the lapsed without any period of penance. Cyprian rejected this move, and some Christians went into schism. This was the occasion for a notable contribution to Catholic teaching. Cyprian wrote about the importance of Christians maintaining unity – even when they disagreed, as he had on occasion with Cornelius. He stressed the importance of the bishop as the servant of that unity in each local Church

In August 257 the Emperor Valerian published an edict requiring Christian bishops, priests and deacons to take part in pagan worship. Cyprian refused and was exiled. In the following August he was brought back to Carthage and on September 14th was brought to trial. Refusing to sacrifice, he was condemned to death by the sword. The sentence was carried out that same day.