Epistle 70

Council of Carthage (AD 257) (AD 257)

SermonIndex.net / Church Fathers

Epistle 70

Cyprian, Liberalis, Caldonius, etc., to their brethren Januarius, etc. Greeting.

When we were together in council, dear-est brethren, we read the letter which you addressed to us respecting those who are thought to be baptized by heretics and schismatics, whether, when they come to the one true Catholic Church, they ought to be baptized. Wherein, although ye yourselves also hold the Catholic rule in its truth and fixedness, yet since, out of our mutual affection, ye have thought good to consult us, we deliver not our sentence as though new but, by a kindred harmony, we unite with you in that long since settled by our predecessors, and observed by us; thinking, namely, and holding for certain, that no one can be baptized without the Church, in that there is one Baptism appointed in the holy Church, and it is written, the Lord himself speaking, "They have forsaken me, the Fountain of living water, and hewed them out broken cisterns that can hold no water." Again, holy Scripture admonishes us, and says, "Keep thee from the strange water, and drink not from a fountain of strange water." The water then must first be cleansed and sanctified by the priest, that it may be able, by Baptism therein, to wash away the sins of the baptized, for the Lord says by the prophet Ezekiel, "Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be cleansed from all your filthiness, and from all your idols will I cleanse you; a new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you." But how can he cleanse and sanctify the water, who is himself unclean, and with whom the Spirit is not? whereas the Lord says in Numbers, "And whatsoever the unclean person toucheth shall be unclean." Or how can he that baptizeth give remission of sins to another, who cannot himself free himself from his own sins, out of the Church?

Moreover, the very interrogatory which is put in Baptism, is a witness of the truth. For when we say, "Dost thou believe ineternal life, and remission of sins through the holy Church?" we mean, that remission of sins is not given, except in the Church; but that, with heretics, where the Church is not, sins cannot be remitted. They, therefore, who claim that heretics can baptize, let them either change the interrogatory, or maintain the truth; unless indeed they ascribe a Church also to those who they contend have Baptism. Anointed also must he of necessity be, who is baptized, that having received the chrism-that is, unction, he may be the anointed of God, and have within him the grace of Christ. Moreover, it is the Eucharist through which the baptized are anointed, the oil sanctified on the altar. But he cannot

sanctify the creature of oil, who has neither altar nor church. Whence neither can the spiritual unction be with heretics, since it is acknowledged that the oil cannot be sanctified nor the Eucharist celebrated among them. But we ought to know and remember that it is written, "Let not the oil of a sinner anoint my head;" which the Holy Ghost forewarned in the Psalms, lest any, quitting the track, and wandering out of the path of truth, be anointed by heretics and adversaries of Christ. Moreover, when baptized, what kind of prayer can a profane priest and a sinner offer? in that it is written, "God heareth not a sinner; but if any man be a worshipper of God, and doeth his will, him he heareth."

But who can give what himself hath not? or how can he perform spiritual acts, who hath himself lost the Holy Spirit? Wherefore he is to be baptized and received, who comes uninitiated to the Church, that within he may be hallowed through the holy; for it is written, "Be ye holy, for I am holy, saith the Lord." So that he who has been seduced into error and washed without should, in the true Baptism of the Church, put off this very thing also; that he, a man coming to God, while seeking for a priest, fell, through the deceit of error, upon one profane. But to acknowledge any case where they have baptized, is to approve the baptism of heretics and schismatics.

For neither can part of what they do be void and part avail. If he could baptize, he could also give the Holy Ghost. But if he cannot give the Holy Ghost because, being set without, he is not with the Holy Ghost, neither can he baptize any that cometh: for that there is both one Baptism, and one Holy Ghost, and one Church, founded by Christ the Lord upon Peter, through an original and principle of unity; so it results, that since all among them is void and false, nothing that they have done ought to be approved by us. For what can be ratified and confirmed by God, which they do whom the Lord calls his enemies and adversaries, propounding in his Gospel, "He that is not with me, is against me; and he that gathereth not with me, scattereth." And the blessed Apostle John also, keeping the commandments and precepts of the Lord, has written in his Epistle, "Ye have heard that Antichrist shall come; even now are there many Antichrists, whereby we know that it is the last time. They went out from us, but were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us." Whence we, too, ought to infer and consider, whether they who are the adversaries of the Lord, and are called Antichrists, can give the grace of Christ. Wherefore we who are with the Lord, and who hold the unity of the Lord, and according to this vouchsafement administer his priesthood in the Church, ought to repudiate and reject and account as profane, whatever his adversaries and Antichrists do; and to those who, coming from error and wickedness, acknowledge the true faith of the one Church, we should impart the reality of unity and faith by all the sacraments of Divine grace.

We bid you, dearest brethren, ever heartily farewell.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and

Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.