

## “Show us how to be holy”

Blessed Cyprian Pilgrimage Gracedieu Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> August 2007

Blessed Cyprian Tansi was remarkable in so many ways. I am sure if I were to ask you in which way you thought he was remarkable, each of you would be able to think of a different example. One thinks of his singleness of purpose, his energy, his courage and fidelity, his self-denial, his love of prayer and the Sacraments. The list is endless. I was wondering what would sum up all these different characteristics. His motto. Do you know what his motto was? **"Show us how to be holy?"** This was a kind of prayer addressed to the Lord: **"Show us, Lord, how to be holy"**

I think we all want to know how to be holy, so if Blessed Cyprian has anything to tell us let us ask him to show us today how to be holy. First of all, he reminds us of something very important about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. It means getting a right balance. At the heart of the Christian message there is paradox. The very word 'paradox' means two truths but two truths both of which are equally true but which are opposite each other and almost seem to be contradictory. For instance, Jesus told us, if we are to find our lives we must lose them, if we are to be the greatest we must be the least; in order to live for Christ we must die to ourselves. 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and die it remains alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit'. Blessed Cyprian grasped this well in all he said and did.

You know how they sometimes call a carpenter a joiner because he joins pieces of wood into different shapes, well a Christian has to be a joiner. A Christian has to be good at joining opposites. The worldly find this very hard to do and so they try to eliminate one or other of the opposite truths. When we look at the life of Blessed Cyprian we can see this principle at work; we see how time after time he managed to combine two opposites. Simple examples from early on in his life show what a balanced lad he was. A friend of his relates this story. "On one occasion, I had to face him in a wrestling match in the public playground of the Aguleri Christian village. He beat me for he threw me down once. On another occasion, I had to face him in the pole vault (high jump) competition during the Silver Jubilee celebration of the founding of the Saint Joseph's Aguleri Parish. Blessed Tansi came first and I was second. Doesn't that show you how Blessed Cyprian was not the odd boy out, the recluse spending all the day in prayer. He joined freely in the normal and popular games and other social amusements. Yet, if he shared in some of the amusements, he certainly did not share in the pagan feast and dances which, in those early days of the Church, were popular with the other boys in the town. From early on then, Blessed Cyprian showed this balance. 'He loved playing games. He was agile and very lively and played football well.' Yet he was also dedicated to the life of the Church.

If he was a good player, he was a good worker too. He moved freely from work to prayer, from resting, eating and recreation back to work and prayer. I mentioned the story of how, as a priest, he pounded the yams when you would have expected him to be waited upon. On another occasion, Blessed Cyprian, with his trouser legs rolled up, was out there treading the mud for the bricks for the new church. No sitting back watching whilst others got on with the work.

As a seminarian, and later as a priest, his motto was always "show us how to be holy." Now, it would have been all too easy to have fallen into the danger of excessive pioucity and extreme religious practices, as if that were the only way to be holy. Blessed Cyprian grasped that to be holy you don't have to spend all your time in church. All the activities of life have to be included. He simply lived the common life, the same as everyone else.

Blessed Cyprian tried to do all the small things of life to perfection. Augustine Metuh, a fellow student of his at the seminary said, "He tried to do everything well, even ordinary manual labour. At Igbariam we had to grow the crops; we had general and private work. Private work was cleaning our rooms, the refectory, dormitory and so on. General work was planting seed yams, cultivating the garden. Even in those early days, he did everything with the utmost perfection. He didn't want anyone else's yam mounds to be bigger or better than his. It was the same with the cleaning.

When you read about his missionary work after his ordination, it soon becomes clear how he had learned how to join opposites. The amount of work involved in starting a mission, building schools and churches, catechising the faithful was phenomenal and would have exhausted a lesser man. But. Blessed Cyprian not only advanced the Church enormously, he was absolutely faithful to his prayer times. Prayer was an integral part of his life. And because he was so Faithful to prayer, his parishioners, adults, school children, mothers or families all formed the habit of paying visits to the Blessed Sacrament because they had seen Blessed Cyprian do so many times. They didn't just see him working on the roof of the church, but they saw him praying long hours in church.

**Show us how to be holy:** not only did he show us how to be holy in the way he lived. He did this supremely when he left behind all the vibrant activity of the parish to come to England to join a monastery dedicated to a life of prayer. There is a profound significance in this step he took. 'This motto of his "Show us how to be holy." could have come to give a wrong message. Had he remained out on the mission the impression would have been that holiness meant achieving results. Blessed Cyprian was succeeding in an extraordinary way in building up the Church, but he would have left us with the idea that external growth was the beginning and end of the Church's life': the holiness we must strive after. In becoming a monk, he showed more clearly than he could have done in any other way that one doesn't become holy by one's own efforts. Holiness is a gift of God. St Therese put it perfectly when she said "Holiness doesn't consist in this or that practice, but in a disposition of heart; the complete trust in God's love and mercy".

Thank you, Blessed Cyprian, for **showing us how to be truly holy.**

By Fr. Mark Hartley