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Almsgiving as Patronage: The Role of the Patroness in Third Century North African Christianity

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ABSTRACT

In the social world of the third century Roman Empire the most important determinant of political and social status and advancement was the giving and receiving of patronage. By means of a close study of two of Cyprian of Carthage's well known treatises, *De opere et eleemosynis* (*On Almsgiving*) and *De habitu virginum* (*On the Dress of Virgins*) within the context of the larger social reality of the Roman patronage system, this study seeks to explore the level of status and authority that women benefactors (patronesses) may have enjoyed within parts of the early Christian Church and ultimately how such status and authority would have been circumscribed by the emerging clerical and hierarchical structure of certain Christian congregations. The goal of the paper is to demonstrate how an appreciation of Roman patron-client relationships helps us to interpret better the complex social dynamic of the emerging Christian community.

In this article I propose to explore the intersection of two social worlds. On the one hand, in the social world of the Roman Empire in the first three centuries perhaps the most important determinant of political and social status and advancement was the giving and receiving of patronage. Thousands of inscriptions, from people of every social position and political status, attest to the social importance of benefactions received and given. On the other hand there was in the first three centuries of the Common Era, within this culture so influenced by this patronage system, the development of another social world, one comprised of hundreds of Christian house churches in cities throughout the Empire. And while there was hardly social structural uniformity across the spectrum of these congregations, by the second and third century some of the larger urban congregations we know most about were moving rapidly toward a shared structure, the institution of offices (bishops, presbyters and deacons) and social roles (widows and virgins) recognizable throughout the Empire by both pagans and Christians alike.

My intention here is to explore a particular case in which the social norms of the Roman patronage system appear quite distinctly to be addressed within the social development of part of the Christian church in the third century. I will limit my focus to two particular third century texts from North Africa,

Cyprian of Carthage's *De opere et eleemosynis* (*On Almsgiving*) and *De habitu virginum* (*On the Dress of Virgins*). The former is in part, the latter entirely, addressed to the women of Carthage. Both are instances in which careful consideration of the ancient social norms of patronage, especially as exercised by Roman women of means, helps us to interpret better the increasingly complex social dynamic of emerging Christianity.

The larger Roman social context within which these two treatises were written was one in which the social norms of patronage – the giving and receiving of benefactions in exchange for social power and prestige – were dominant. So it is that Cyprian, bishop of the Christian community in Carthage from 248-258 CE, was aware of its altogether pervasive influence among the political and social elite of the third century:

You see him, illustrious with glorious clothing, to shine, as it seems to him, in purple. With what dirtiness does he purchase this so that he might shine? What disdain of the high and mighty has he first endured? What arrogant porches has he occupied as an early greeter? How many reproaching footsteps of puffed-up men has he preceded, thronged in the crowds of clients, in order that later a procession might go before him, an obsequious group of greeters, subservient not to the man but to his power? Nor is he held in esteem for his character, but for his benefactions. Finally you may see the disgusting end of these men, when the flatterer, the temporary trifler, has departed, when the deserting sycophant has defiled the exposed pride of the (now) private man. Then the mutilating wounds of the house strike the conscience, then the losses of the exhausted estate are recognized, losses by which the favor of the populace was purchased (*redemptus*) and popularity was sought with fickle and stupid promises.¹

Within the larger social context of the patronage system, the patronage provided within and for smaller collectives, sometimes referred to as *collegia tenuiorum*,² perhaps comes closest to emulating the social dynamics of the early

¹ *Ad Donatum* 11.232-44, CSEL, ed. Simonetti. All translations in this study are my own. The description here is remarkably similar to the description of clients in Juvenal and Martial, a point which has not been discussed in the secondary literature. See S.L. Mohler, 'Feminism in the Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum', *The Classical Weekly* 25 (1932), 113-7, 114, 'It follows as a natural corollary to the importance of games and *epula* in the life of ancient communities that social leadership was determined to a considerable extent by the ability of individuals to supply the demand for these forms of entertainment'. For a discussion of the unique role of aristocratic benefaction in Roman society, see Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations* (New Haven, 1974), 61-2.

² One might include here a discussion of the Jewish synagogues. Yet we simply do not know that much about the characteristic social practices of these groups outside of Palestine during the imperial period. See, e.g., Harry J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome* (Philadelphia, 1960), 167-94. From the list provided by Bernadette Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue* (Chico, 1982), 229, it would appear that social status and wealth and the willingness to exercise patronage played a large role in determining office and thereby authority. For more discussion see Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York, 1987), 496, and Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth*, ed. and trans. John H. Schütz (Philadelphia, 1982), 192 n. 33 (and note the inscriptions cited by both authors). On the purpose, size and composition

Christian communities. These voluntary associations seem to have been organized on the model of the cities.³ Like the cities, their honorific inscriptions listed patrons (*patroni*), officers (e.g. *sacerdotes*, *magistri*, *quinquennales*, *curatores*) and council members (*decuriones*). Ordinary members (*plebs* or *populus*) were listed as a separate rank (*ordo*).

The role of the patrons (*patroni*), along with the officers of the *collegia*, seems primarily to have been the provision of benefaction in exchange for

of the various *collegia*, see E. Kornemann, 'art. Collegium', in *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (Stuttgart, 1900), 380-480, 385; Frank M. Ausbüttel, *Untersuchungen zu den Vereinen im Westen des römischen Reiches* (Regensburg, 1982), 34-48 and Jean-Paul Waltzing, *Étude historique sur les corporations professionnelles chez les romains*, 4 vols. (Louvain, 1895-1900), I 339 and 383. Waltzing rightly cautions that there was a great variety of internal organization and that the associations only resembled each other in the essential parts of their organization. *Collegia* could vary in size from a handful already associated in a household to several hundred in the larger associations in Rome. It appears to be true, however, that the provision of funerals was a major preoccupation of almost all of these societies. The relation of the early Christian communities to these societies has been the subject of much debate. Early studies were more concerned with the question of category. See Jean-Paul Waltzing, 'Collegia', in Ferdinand Cabrol and Henri LeClercq (eds), *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie* (Paris, 1914), col. 2107-40, 2118: 'Non, les communautés chrétiennes n'étaient pas collèges funéraires, mais des sociétés religieuses', and E.G. Hardy, *Studies in Roman History* (New York, 1906), 129-50. More recent studies, like the present one, have not looked at the issue from the point of view of a shared social and ideological environment, the study of which can inform our understanding of both. See, e.g., L. William Countryman, 'Patrons and Officers in Club and Church', *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 11 (1977), 135-43; Robert Wilken, 'Toward a Social Interpretation of Early Christian Apologetics', *CH* 39 (1970), 437-58. Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven, 1983), 77-80; Jean Gagé, *Les classes sociales dans l'empire romain* (Paris, 1964), 307-13; E.A. Judge, *The Social Pattern of the Christian Groups in the First Century* (London, 1960), 40-8; Marta Sordi, *The Christians and the Roman Empire*, trans. Annabel Bedini (Norman, 1986), 182-6.

³ The term *collegia tenuiorum* is taken from a reference in Marcian, *Digest* 47.22. There is evidence of these small private associations from all over the Empire in every period, but the categorization of the myriad of association inscriptions is not quite so easy. Robert Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven, 1984), 34 (rightly setting aside the official colleges of priests which have very little in common with private voluntary associations) divides them into three main groups: professional corporations (shipowners, fruitgrowers, fishermen of the Tiber etc.); funerary societies and religious associations centered on the worship of a deity. Moreover, R. Duncan-Jones, *Economy of the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 1984), 277-80, has shown that for Africa another type of association must be considered: the *curia*. These *curiae* (not to be confused with the municipal senate of the same name) seem to have been semi-official organizations of limited size (in an average town there were perhaps 10 or 11 *curiae* with 50-60 members each) located in many of the cities of Africa. The fact that they were distinguished from the *ordo* perhaps signals that they were slightly proletarian in their composition. None of these association types, however, existed in pure form. For example, all of the colleges incorporated the worship of one or more deities and most (if not all) were also funerary societies. Therefore the discussion which follows will necessarily be eclectic. See also J.-P. Waltzing, *Étude historique* (1895), I 33ff; E. Kornemann, 'Collegium' (1900), 385ff.; Samuel Dill, *Roman Society From Nero to Marcus Aurelius* (London, 1905), 251-82; F.M. Ausbüttel, *Untersuchungen* (1982), 34-48.

positions of greater status and honor within the groups.⁴ The patrons of *collegia* are credited with providing their client associations with meeting places (*schola*), statues and the decoration of the grounds surrounding them, outright distributions of money or gifts (*sportulae*), grants of money to be put out at interest for annual celebrations (for example, banquets on the birthday of the patron or of the patron deity) and other provisions.⁵ Such gifts were made *ob honorem*, that is, for the sake of honor.⁶ Like civic office holders, officers in the associations were required to pay a set fee for the privilege of office (*summa honoraria*) and as well having to offer certain other amenities for the entertainment of the members.⁷ In return patrons of *collegia* were sometimes provided with the *tessera patronatus*, a plaque which designated them as patron and which could be placed in the patron's home.⁸ They could also hold the special seat of honor within the *collegium*, the *bisellium*.⁹ Patrons and officers were sometimes termed *honorati* (honored ones) and were listed first on the membership list (*album*) of the association.¹⁰ On social occasions, when there was a

⁴ The role of the formally designated patron in the *collegia* appears also to have been akin to the role of patron designated by the cities. As in the cities, there was a *cursus honorum* which at times could culminate in being named a *patronus* of the association. Though there is less evidence of the patron serving as protector of the association's interests in the wider society, there are examples of such a function in some of the more prominent associations. See *CIL* VI 1872 (Fishermen of the Tiber thank a patron for securing rights to river navigation); *CIL* V 4341 (a priestly college thanks a patron for his help in securing an immunity). See J.-P. Waltzing, *Étude historique* (1895), I 437. The role of the patron as primarily a provider of *beneficia* is signaled by the adoption of wealthy patrons who would have had little or no influence in the wider society (youth, women and especially freedman), but who might have eagerly sought out the *collegia* to provide them with the status they could not have in the wider society (J.-P. Waltzing, *Étude historique* [1895], I 441). See *CIL* IX 1684 for the cooptation as *patroni* of an entire family (the 'Crispini', patrons of the city and college).

⁵ See S. Dill, *Roman Society* (1905), 271-3, for numerous examples.

⁶ Examples of the formula *ob honorem patrocinii* or *patronalis honor* are in J.-P. Waltzing, *Étude historique* (1895), I 431. See E. Kornemann's comment: 'Die Ganze (the naming of a patron) war eine Speculation auf die Freibigkeit reicher Gönner. *Ob honorem patronatus* wurde tüchtig gezahlt' (E. Kornemann, 'Collegium' [1900], 424).

⁷ For example, 'whoever desires to be *flamen* is to give three amphoras of wine in addition to bread and salt and victuals. Whoever desires to be *magister* is to give two amphoras of wine', *ILS* 6824 (*curia* of Jove in Simittus, North Africa, 185 AD). So also the same person is often listed as an officer in more than one *collegium* (see E. Kornemann, 'Collegium' [1900], 420), probably selected for their material capacity to be a patron of more than one association; see Charles A. Bobertz, 'Cyprian of Carthage as Patron: A Social Historical Study of the Role of Bishop in the Ancient Christian Community of North Africa' (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yale University, 1988), 46.

⁸ J.-P. Waltzing, *Étude historique* (1895), I 429.

⁹ One patron on the *album* for a *collegium* of carpenters in Etruria is termed *pater collegi bisellarius* ('Numisius Tacitus Pater Collegi Bisellarius', *CIL* XI 1355). This term also appears in the same inscription under the list of *decuriones*: 'Herennius Demetrius Bisell. Dendrophor'. See J.-P. Waltzing, *Étude historique* (1895), I 431, for discussion.

¹⁰ *CIL* XIV 246-56. See the discussion in J.-P. Waltzing, *Étude historique* (1895), I 430-1. See E. Kornemann, 'Collegium' (1900), 418.

distribution to the whole association, the patrons and officers routinely received the largest share.¹¹ It should be noted, moreover, that honorific decrees thanking the patron for his or her *beneficia* were most often voted by the entire association: 'the whole membership consented' or 'it pleased everyone that a statue, plaque *etc.* be provided for...'¹²

Here we must also take special note of the fact that in ancient society the granting of patronage and the consequent reception of public office, status and honor was not limited to men. We have inscriptional evidence of numerous women patrons of towns and *collegia*, from Menodora of the Psidian city of Sillyon who held a series of magistracies, priesthoods and liturgies in that town,¹³ to the less famous Pompeia Agrippinilla, priestess of a small Dionysiac *thiasos* (small sacred society) in Tusculum made up of members largely from her own household.¹⁴ Yet at the same time we should be careful not to account this feature of ancient life as anything like equal opportunity: women as patrons and office holders are a distinct minority in extant inscriptions.¹⁵

Turning back now to the two treatises by Cyprian under consideration, *De opere et eleemosynis* (*On Almsgiving*) and *De habitu virginum* (*On the Dress of Virgins*), both appear to be primarily addressed to women, quite possibly wealthy women, within the community of Carthage. And it is possible to discern how Cyprian as bishop is actively and carefully shaping the social norms of the patronage system to fit his vision of the proper social structure of the emerging Christian Church of the third century.

De opere et eleemosynis, undoubtedly written early in Cyprian's episcopal career,¹⁶ is the first work in Christian literature devoted specifically to almsgiving.

¹¹ J.-P. Waltzing, *Étude historique* (1895), I 367. When an officer had held all the offices he was listed in an honorific inscription as 'having passed through all honors' (*CIL* XI 2643: *omnibus honoribus functo*). See *CIL* VI 1060 for an *album* clearly listing *honorati*. In *CIL* VI 9044 a college of smiths in Rome honors Narcissus the decurion for a distribution of HS10 and the giving of a *cena* where he gave double to the priests (*sacerdotes*), *honorati* and *decuriones* of the college. In *CIL* VI 3678 Marcus Valerius Felix, *honoratus* of a college, gave double gifts (presumably to the *honorati* and *decuriones* who authorized the dedicatory inscription).

¹² Examples in J.-P. Waltzing, *Étude historique* (1895), I 374-7. As in the cities, a majority of those honored paid for it themselves (J.-P. Waltzing, *Étude historique* [1895], I 432). In addition, the fact that officers and patrons appear to have been elected by the general assembly (*conventus*) must have enhanced the mutual bond.

¹³ Riet Van Bremen, 'Women and Wealth', in Averil Cameron and Amelie Kuhrt (eds), *Images of Women in Antiquity* (London, 1983), 223-42, 223. See Ramsay MacMullen, 'Women in Public in the Roman Empire', *Historia* 29 (1980), 209-18, 214.

¹⁴ See the discussion in Meeks, *Urban Christians* (1983), 31.

¹⁵ R. MacMullen, 'Women in Public' (1980), 213.

¹⁶ Hugo Koch, *Cyprianische Untersuchungen* (Bonn, 1926), 148, places it as an appeal for funds in connection to the plague (see p. 145 for references to earlier scholars who also took this position). L. William Countryman, *The Rich Christian in the Church of the Early Empire: Contradictions and Accommodations* (New York, 1980), 195, is mainly concerned with attempting to explain away the thoroughgoing presentation of atonement for alms (dating it to a period of

In the middle of the treatise, in a section which has hardly been noticed by scholars, Cyprian turns to address directly a group of women, virgins, matrons and widows, whom he undoubtedly considers wealthy and propertied. He implores them, as it were, to become patronesses of the Christian community in Carthage: (*De opere* 14). Following a citation to *Rev. 3:17-8* ('For you say, I am rich, I have prospered...') Cyprian admonishes:

As for the rest, you women who cannot give charity in the church (*in ecclesia*), the needy and the poor are not seen by eyes overshadowed by black darkness and night. You women who are wealthy and rich, do you believe that you celebrate the Lord's Supper (*dominicum*) when you do not respect at all what is offered (*corban*)? You who come to the Lord's Supper without a sacrifice (*sacrificio*), you who claim part of the sacrifice that the poor person has offered?¹⁷

The bishop of Carthage continues by citing the example of the widow's mite in *Luke 21* as well as the story of the widow and Elijah from *1Kings 17*. All told, the specific appeal to these wealthy women of Carthage takes up four chapters in the treatise (14-18). It is assumed by Cyprian that they are in a position to give (*i.e.*, irrespective of husbands or any other financial oversight such as the Roman practice of *tutela* [guardianship]) and constitute a particular and substantial audience within the Christian congregation at Carthage.

Cyprian even provides some good clues that the financial resources of these women would have been considerable. When he addresses the virgins of Carthage in *De habitu virginum*, a treatise close in time and subject matter to *De opere et eleemosynis*,¹⁸ he refers to those who are 'wealthy and rich and in

extraordinary financial strain in the year 252). Michael Sage, *Cyprian* (Cambridge, 1975), 273-5, places the treatise during the plague, perhaps directed to the raising of funds for those suffering outside the Christian community (a misguided connection to chapter nine of the *Vita Cypriani*). Edward Rebenack (ed. and trans.), *Thasci Caecili Cypriani De Opere et Eleemosynis: A Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (Washington, 1962), 1-47, however, is undoubtedly correct to place this treatise before the persecution. There is no mention of the persecution or the effects it might have had on the topic being addressed, though one would expect at least an allusion (so also there is no mention of the plague). There is also the general affinity of subject matter with *De habitu virginum*, a treatise which is generally admitted to be pre-persecution.

¹⁷ This is undoubtedly a reference to the bread provided for the liturgical meal as well as any money to be offered for the poor. Compare *De opere* 15.283-7, CChr.SL, ed. M. Simonetti; see 14.274: 'You who are wealthy and rich, purchase for yourself gold purified by fire. So that you may be pure gold with your impurities purged as if by fire, if you are purged by acts of charity. Purchase for yourself the white garment, so that you who were naked according to Adam, unsightly and incomplete, may be clothed with the white cloth of Christ. And you wealthy and rich matrons, anoint your eyes not with the stigma of the devil, but with the salve of Christ, so that you might be able to approach and see God, while also deserving God through your charity and character'.

¹⁸ That wealthy virgins are included among the addressees of both treatises is indicated by the almost identical terminology of direct address used in both treatises (not repeated elsewhere in Cyprian's treatises): *locuples et dives*, *De habitu*, chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11; see *De opere*, chapters 14, 15, CSEL, ed. Hartel.

abundance of means' (*divites et facultatum ubertate locupletes*).¹⁹ An even more striking indication of the possible wealth of some of these women in Carthage occurs in chapter eleven:

A large patrimony (*patrimonium grande*) is a temptation, unless the property (*census*) is donated (*operetur*) to good purposes, so that by means of her patrimony, every wealthy woman ought to pay for (*redimere*) her sins rather than to augment them.²⁰

The word *census* here most likely alludes to the property rating of Roman citizens, that is, it implies the amount of familial wealth required for the holding of particular social and political status in the larger society (e.g. senator, knight or decurion). As such it probably does not refer to a small amount, but rather the large fortune, the *patrimonium grande*, which would have been the prerogative of the tiny aristocratic elite in Carthage. Corroborating evidence indicates that by the middle of the third century it was not uncommon for certain Christians, perhaps even Cyprian himself, to achieve the highest social and political rank of Roman senator.²¹

So there is good reason to believe that at least a portion of the female audience envisioned by Cyprian here were of the social and economic status long sought as patronesses in the Roman world. The public and social potential of such large benefactions to bring honor, status and authority to the benefactor brings to the fore the delicate interplay between the obvious need for such patronage within the Christian community and the ways in which a bishop such as Cyprian might attempt specifically to limit its expected prerogatives.

Even more, such tension, potential and actual, between larger societal norms and expectations surrounding patronage and the norms and expectations internal to the Christian community must have been made even more complex by a different sort of status, intrinsic to the Christian community, possessed by at least some of the women addressed in these treatises. As *De habitu virginum* makes clear, women who were virgins, perhaps also widows, possessed an unmistakable status as living symbols of an eschatological perfection. They were 'the whole and incorruptible work of praise and honor, the image of God (*Dei imago*) replicating the holiness of the Lord, the more illustrious portion of

¹⁹ *De habitu virginum* 7.12.

²⁰ *De habitu virginum* 11.195.22-4. L.W. Countryman, *Rich Christian* (1980), 195, in describing the doctrine of atonement for alms which is operative both here and in *De opere et eleemosynis*, fails to note that it is based on an interpretation of *Prov.* 16:6; 19:17, which is the subject of the first heading of the third book of *Ad Quirinum*.

²¹ For extended discussion, see C.A. Bobertz, 'Cyprian of Carthage as Patron' (1988), 75-93. Perhaps guilt by association is the best evidence of all, thus the *Vita Cypriani* (written shortly after the death of Cyprian) describes Cyprian during his second exile: 'Many knights (*egregii*) and senators (*clarissimi*) of rank and ancestry were in his company, but also the eminent in the nobility of the world, who, because of his ancient friendship with them, would repeatedly argue for his withdrawal' (14.21-4, CSEL, ed. Hartel).

the flock of Christ'.²² The language of image here, *Dei imago*, was an unmistakable reference to the by now traditional Christian interpretation of the Adam-Christ Genesis myth:²³ the practice of virginity, especially among women, was interpreted as a living symbol of the return by mankind to the state of perfection (without sin) which existed in the Garden of Eden before Eve's transgression. This, more than any other symbol, made present the ideal of the resurrection body, the state that Christ had already obtained and so the eschatological goal of all Christians. Indeed, Cyprian intimates that the virgins of Carthage, akin to his own virginity, have already begun to take on bodies of resurrection: 'Let us serve him whose (body) we have already begun to be'.²⁴

Apparently then some of these wealthy women in Carthage would have presented claims for particular status, irrespective of the bishop and the emerging clerical structure, on at least two fronts: as present and potent symbols of the future eschatological destiny of all Christians and as current and potential social patronesses of the Christian community. Perhaps this is why Cyprian, in his address to the Virgins, is so extraordinarily deferent in tone: 'To these (virgins) we speak, we exhort them with affection rather than with power; nor would we claim a prerogative to censure, we who are last and least and very conscious of our own humility...'²⁵

Here I think we can begin to discern what impact the solicited patronage of such women in Carthage would have had upon their roles in the congregation. Ramsay MacMullen argues, for example, that in Greco-Roman society as a whole, women patrons would have been visible and prominent, publically receiving the special honors and status accorded them by their clients, individuals and associations, and recorded in the inscriptions we now read.²⁶ Indeed, it is hard to imagine that large benefactions of the sort Cyprian was requesting in *De opere* (less so *De habitu virginum*) would not have had the social potential to thrust some women into similar positions of honor and status. While all the while the status of those who were also celibate would stake out a claim in territory long sought after by ordinary Christians: the eschatological body itself.

Given the expected exercise of ecclesial and social authority by such women, we are perhaps in a better position to appreciate the theological argument taken up by Cyprian in this treatise. Cyprian makes the point that acts of charity, what the Roman world would understand as benefactions with commensurate expectations of authority and prestige, resulted in atonement for the sins of

²² *De habitu virginum* 3.13-5.

²³ See the important study by Wayne Meeks, 'The Image of the Androgyne: Some Uses of a Symbol in Earliest Christianity', *History of Religions* 13 (1974), 165-208.

²⁴ *De habitu virginum* 2.15-6.

²⁵ *De habitu virginum* 3.18-21.

²⁶ R. Macmullen, 'Women in Public' (1980), 212-5.

the Christian benefactor. In the midst of wealthy virgin women who in themselves also possessed a claim of eschatological status, Cyprian argues that neither baptism, the ritual rite of forgiveness of sins and entry into the Church, nor even virginity itself, were to be conceived of as the primary arbiters of an *attained* eschatological status within the Church. Rather, Cyprian's understanding of any eschatological status is decidedly future oriented. *Continual* acts of atonement, in this case works of charity, were necessary for all individual Christian women, virgins, widows and matrons alike, to purge sin and thus *eventually* to attain the final goal of being with Christ.²⁷ Hence here in the Christian community patronage is elicited in the present but the expected return of any heightened social status is deferred. For Cyprian the Christian understanding of a realistic life in a *future* heaven, a *future* eschatological body, alters the traditional social contract: women are to be current benefactors but only future recipients of honor and status.

In addition, Cyprian argues that the locus of atonement, the forgiveness of the benefactors' sins and so heightened eschatological status within the community, was *only* to be found within the parameters of the cultic assembly referred to as the Lord's Supper.²⁸ Any benefactions given by these women *must* be located specifically within that context, in Cyprian's words, *in ecclesiam*. Such benefactions are further described by the technical word, *corban*, as gifts dedicated to God within that assembly.²⁹ Cyprian specifically designates these potential benefactions as 'sacrifices' (*sacrificia*) and, in the course of commenting on the story of the widow's mite (*Luke 21*), further stipulates:

that we understand these charitable works (*opera*) to be given to God (*deo dari*) and that whoever does these things to be favored by God, Christ calls the *corban* the gifts of God (*dona dei*) and tells us that the widow has cast her two mites into the gifts of God, so that it can become more and more evident that whosoever is merciful to the poor *lends to God at interest* (*faenerat, De habitu 15.303-7*).

Indeed, Cyprian, like other Christians of his day, understood a direct correlation to exist between the ritual function of the present Christian Lord's Supper (*Dominicum*) and that of the Jewish temple outlined in the narrative of Luke. It is the particular Christian assembly, this particular sacred space, rather than

²⁷ *De opere 2.30-2: Et quia semel in baptismo remissa peccatorum datur, absidua et iugis operatio baptismi instar imitata Dei rursus indulgentiam largiatur. See De habitu virginum 11.22-4 (quoted above).*

²⁸ For what follows, see the quote above, *De opere 15.283-7*.

²⁹ It is interesting to note, moreover, that Cyprian in this treatise pays no attention to the New Testament context of the word *corban* (*Mark 7:11*), though one might have expected this given the way Cyprian normally develops arguments in close conjunction with biblical texts. Rather the word appears to have an independent technical meaning to denote gifts given within the context of the cultic assembly. Michael Slusser, 'The Corban Passages in Patristic Exegesis', in Thomas Halton and Joseph Williman (eds), *Diakonia* (Washington, 1986), 101-7, does not comment on the use of the term in Cyprian.

individual actors or actions, which now possesses the prerogatives of the earlier temple: namely, the place of the rite of ritual atonement that culminates in the Christian eschatological attainment of the resurrection body, to be in Christ.

Yet simultaneously with his rhetorical assertion that the proper locus of these womens' benefactions was within the cultic assembly, Cyprian lays considerable stress on such benefactions being 'given to God' (*Deo dari*). And while this might to our ears sound innocuous, in the context of an ancient world filled with literally thousands of monuments and plaques dedicated to the honor of patrons and patronesses, it must have been striking that individual acts of patronage would have been re-inscribed in this way. In Cyprian's view, the gifts *given to God* within the assembly put God in the odd position of being a client of the Christian patroness. She will not only gain on-going atonement, but other favors from God as well. In fact she lends to God at interest (*faenerat*). In turn, of course, it is God, but now through the auspices of the Christian assembly and its bishop, who becomes the *actual* and immediate patron of the poor and needy in the assembly. Whatever honor and authority these clients, the poor within the congregation, would have bestowed on any patroness now becomes the prerogative of God as patron and, almost directly, the bishop as God's agent in the giving of benefactions.

We see here in Cyprian's writing, interpreted within the social and ecclesial context of the Roman world of the third century, a symmetry between emerging doctrinal definition and the emergence of certain patterns of Christian organization: the continued solidification of clerical status and hierarchy within the greater catholic churches. Both the ordinary social authority gained by patronage and the specifically eschatological authority gained by virginity are addressed in these two treatises of Cyprian. Even the virgin must make *progress* toward her final eschatological salvation by continuing to give alms *within the Church* unto the forgiveness of her sins. And when she does give alms she makes a sacrifice within the structure of the Church, she lends *to God at interest*. She does not therefore accrue from potential clients status and authority to herself. Rather, she provides for God to become the patron of the Church. And so God will now bestow honor and status to the *Church* itself, the Church of the bishops.

It should come as no surprise then, that the most carefully defended and articulated role of the bishop in Cyprian's writings is his position as sacrificial priest in the assembly.³⁰ To maintain that all ordinary acts of patronage were to be renamed in Christian terms as sacrifices within the cultic assembly was to claim simultaneously that the role of priest was paramount in their collection and distribution. The personal and earthly patronage of women within the congregations, with its commensurate claim to authority, was now subsumed within the emerging social and theological structure of the church.

³⁰ See C.A. Bobertz, 'Cyprian of Carthage as Patron' (1988), 98-9, esp. n. 49. See Maurice Bévénat, 'Sacerdos as Understood by Cyprian', *JTS* 30 (1979), 413-29.