Cyril of Alexandria

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Saint Cyril of Alexandria



St Cyril I, the 24th Pope of Alexandria

The Pillar of Faith; Bishop, Confessor and Doctor of the Church

Born	c. 376
Died	c. 444
Venerated in	Roman Catholic Church Eastern Orthodox Church Oriental Orthodox Church Anglicanism Lutheranism
Feast	18 January and 9 June (Orthodox Churches) 27 June (Coptic Church, Roman Catholic Church- but 9 February in Roman Calendar 1882-1939 - and Lutheran Church)
Attributes	Vested as a Bishop with phelonion and omophorion, and usually with his head covered in the manner of Egyptian

	monastics (sometimes the head covering has a *polystavrion* pattern), he usually is depicted holding a Gospel Book or a scroll, with his right hand raised in blessing.
Patronage	Alexandria

Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376 - 444) was the Patriarch of Alexandria from 412 to 444. He came to power when the city was at its height of influence and power within the Roman Empire. Cyril wrote extensively and was a leading protagonist in the Christological controversies of the later 4th and 5th centuries. He was a central figure in the First Council of Ephesus in 431, which led to the deposition of Nestorius as Patriarch of Constantinople.

Cyril is counted among the Church Fathers and the Doctors of the Church, and his reputation within the Christian world has resulted in his titles *Pillar of Faith* and *Seal of all the Fathers*, but Theodosius II, the Roman Emperor, condemned him for behaving like a *proud pharaoh*, and the Nestorian bishops at the Council of Ephesus declared him a heretic, labelling him as a "monster, born and educated for the destruction of the church".[1]

Cyril is controversial because of his involvement in the expulsion of Novatians and Jews from Alexandria and the murder of the hellenistic philosopher Hypatia. Historians disagree over the extent of his responsibility for these events.

The Roman Catholic Church did not commemorate Saint Cyril in the Tridentine Calendar: it added his feast only in 1882, assigning to it the date of 9 February. The 1969 revision moved it to 27 June, considered to be the day of the saint's death, as celebrated by the Coptic Orthodox Church.[2] The same date has been chosen for the Lutheran calendar. The Eastern Orthodox Church and Eastern Catholic Church celebrate his feast day on 9 June and also, together with Pope Athanasius I of Alexandria, on 18 January.

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[edit] Life

[edit] Early life



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Cyril was born in 376 *circa*, in the small town of Theodosios, Egypt, near modern day El-Mahalla El-Kubra. A few years after his birth, his maternal uncle Theophilus rose to the powerful position of Patriarch of Alexandria. His mother remained close to her brother and under his guidance, Cyril was well educated. His education showed through his knowledge, in his writings, of Christian writers of his day, including Eusebius, Origen, Didymus the Blind, and writers of the Church of Alexandria. He received the formal education standard for his day: he studied grammar from age twelve to fourteen (390-392), rhetoric and humanities from fifteen to twenty (393-397) and finally theology and biblical studies (398-402).

[edit] Patriarch of Alexandria

Theophilus died on October 15, 412, and Cyril was made Pope or Patriarch of Alexandria on 18 October 412, against the party favouring Archdeacon Timothy.

[edit] Persecution of the Novatians and Jews

Thus, Cyril followed his uncle in a position that had become powerful and influential, rivalling that of the prefect in a time of turmoil and frequently violent conflict between the cosmopolitan city's Pagan, Jewish, and Christian inhabitants.[3]

He began to exert his authority by causing the churches of the Novatians to be closed and their sacred vessels to be seized.

Orestes, *Praefectus augustalis* of the Diocese of Egypt, steadfastly resisted Cyril's agenda of ecclesiastical encroachment onto secular prerogatives.[4] On one occasion, Cyril sent the *grammaticus* Hierax to secretly discover the content of an edict that Orestes was to promulgate on the mimes shows, which attracted great crowds. When the Jews, with whom Cyril had clashed before, discovered the presence of Hierax, they rioted, complaining that Hierax's presence was aimed at provoking them.[5] Then Orestes had Hierax tortured in public in a theatre. This order had two aims: the first was to quell the riot, the other to mark Orestes' authority over Cyril.[6]

According to Christian sources, the Jews of Alexandria schemed against the Christians and killed many of them; Cyril reacted and expelled either all of the Jews, or else only the murderers, from Alexandria, actually exerting a power that belonged to the civil officer, Orestes.[7] Orestes was powerless, but nonetheless rejected Cyril's gesture of offering him a Bible, which would mean that the religious authority of Cyril would require Orestes' acquiescence in the bishop's policy.[8]

This refusal almost cost Orestes his life. Nitrian monks came from the desert and instigated a riot against Orestes among the population of Alexandria. These monks' violence had already been used, 15 years before, by Theophilus (Cyril's uncle) against the "Tall Brothers"; furthermore, it is said that Cyril had spent five years among them in ascetic training. The monks assaulted Orestes and accused him of being a pagan. Orestes rejected the accusations, showing that he had been baptised by the Archbishop of Constantinople. However, the monks were not satisfied, and one of them, Ammonius, threw a stone and hit Orestes in the head, and so much blood flowed out that he was covered in it. Orestes' guard, fearing to be stoned by the monks, fled leaving Orestes alone. The people of Alexandria, however, came to his help, captured Ammonius and put the monks to flight. Orestes was cured and put Ammonius under torture in a public place, killing him. The prefect then wrote to the emperor Theodosius II, telling him of the events. Cyril also wrote to the Emperor, telling his version of the events. The bishop also seized the body of Ammonius and put it in a church, conferring upon him the title of *Thaumasius* and putting his name in the list of the martyrs. However, the Christian population of Alexandria knew that Ammonius had been killed for his assault and not for his faith, and Cyril was obliged to remain silent about the events.[*clarification needed*][9][10]

[edit] Murder of Hypatia



The Alexandrian philosopher Hypatia (detail of *The School of Athens*, by Raphael, Apostolic Palace, Rome, 1509-1510). Some Christians thought that Hypatia's influence had caused Orestes, the *Praefectus augustalis* of the Diocese of Egypt, to reject all reconciliatory offerings by Cyril. A group of Cyril's supporters killed her in the streets.

Prefect Orestes enjoyed the political backing of Hypatia, a philosopher and scientist who had considerable moral authority in the city of Alexandria, and who had extensive influence. Indeed many students from wealthy and influential families came to Alexandria purposely to study privately with Hypatia, and many of these later attained high posts in government and the Church. Several Christians thought that Hypatia's influence had caused Orestes to reject all reconciliatory offerings by Cyril. Modern historians think that Orestes had cultivated his relationship with Hypatia to strengthen a bond with the Pagan community of Alexandria, as he had done with the Jewish one, to handle better the difficult political life of the Egyptian capital.[11] A Christian mob possibly led by Parabalani, however, grabbed Hypatia out of her chariot and brutally murdered her, hacking her body apart and burning the pieces outside the city walls.[12][13]

Modern studies represent Hypatia's death as the result of a struggle between two Christian factions, the moderate Orestes, supported by Hypatia, and the more rigid Cyril.[14] According to lexicographer William Smith, "She was accused of too much familiarity with Orestes, prefect of Alexandria, and the charge spread among the clergy, who took up the notion that she interrupted the friendship of Orestes with their archbishop, Cyril."[15]

Orthodox Christian scholar John Anthony McGuckin states: "At this time Cyril is revealed as at the head of dangerously volatile forces: at their head, but not always in command of them."[16]

[edit] Conflict with Nestorius

Another major conflict was between the Alexandrian and Antiochian schools of ecclesiastical reflection, piety, and discourse. This long running conflict widened with the third canon of the First Council of Constantinople which granted the see of Constantinople primacy over the older sees of Alexandria and Antioch. Thus, the struggle between the sees of Alexandria and Antioch now included Constantinople. The conflict came to a head in 428 after Nestorius, who originated in Antioch, was made Archbishop of Constantinople.[17]

Cyril gained an opportunity to restore Alexandria's pre-eminence over both Antioch and Constantinople when an Antiochine priest who was in Constantinople at Nestorius' behest began to preach against calling Mary the "Mother of God". As the term "Mother of God" had long been attached to Mary, the laity in Constantinople complained against the priest. Rather than repudiating the priest, Nestorius intervened on his behalf. Nestorius argued that Mary was neither a "Mother of Man" nor "Mother of God" as these referred to Christ's two natures; rather, Mary was the "Mother of Christ". Christ, according to Nestorius, was the conjunction of the Godhead with his "temple" (which Nestorius was fond of calling his human nature). The controversy seemed to be centered on the issue of the suffering of Christ. Cyril maintained that the Son of God or the divine Word, truly suffered "in the flesh."[18] However, Nestorius claimed that the Son of God was altogether incapable of suffering, even within his union with the flesh.[19] Eusebius of Dorylaeum went so far as to accuse Nestorius of adoptionism. By this time, news of the controversy in the capital had reached Alexandria. At Easter 429 A.D., Cyril wrote a letter to the Egyptian monks warning them of Nestorius' views. A copy of this letter reached Constantinople where Nestorius preached a sermon against it. This began a series of letters between Cyril and Nestorius which gradually became more strident in tone. Finally, Emperor Theodosius II convoked a council in Ephesus to solve the dispute. Cyril selected Ephesus as the venue since it supported the veneration of Mary (a transferance from the city's pre-christian veneration of the Greek goddess Artemis). Ephesus was friendly to Cyril[*citation needed*], Cyril and his supporters started the Council of Ephesus (in 431) before Nestorius's supporters from Antioch and Syria had arrived and thus Nestorius refused to attend when summoned. Predictably, the Council ordered the deposition and exile of Nestorius for heresy.

However, when John of Antioch and the other pro-Nestorius bishops finally reached Ephesus, they assembled their own Council, condemned Cyril for

heresy, deposed him from his see, and labelled him as a *monster, born and educated for the destruction of the church*.[20] Theodosius, by now old enough to hold power by himself, annulled the verdict of the Council and arrested Cyril, but Cyril eventually escaped. Having fled to Egypt, Cyril bribed Theodosius' courtiers, and sent a mob led by Dalmatius, a hermit, to besiege Theodosius' palace, and shout abuse; the Emperor eventually gave in, sending Nestorius into minor exile (Upper Egypt).[20] The events created a major schism, forming the Church of the East.

Cyril died about 444, but the controversies were to continue for decades, from the "Robber Synod" of Ephesus (449) to the Council of Chalcedon (451) and beyond.

[edit] Theology

Cyril regarded the embodiment of God in the person of Jesus Christ to be so mystically powerful that it spread out from the body of the God-man into the rest of the race, to reconstitute human nature into a graced and deified condition of the saints, one that promised immortality and transfiguration to believers. Nestorius, on the other hand, saw the incarnation as primarily a moral and ethical example to the faithful, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. Cyril's constant stress was on the simple idea that it was God who walked the streets of Nazareth (hence Mary was Theotokos (God Bearer)), and God who had appeared in a transfigured humanity. Nestorius spoke of the distinct 'Jesus the man' and 'the divine Logos' in ways that Cyril thought were too dichotomous, widening the ontological gap between man and God in a way that would annihilate the person of Christ.

The main issue that prompted this dispute between Cyril and Nestorius was the question which arose at the Council of Constantinople: What exactly was the being to which Mary gave birth? Cyril posited that the composition of the Trinity consisted of one divine essence (ousia) in three distinct modes of being (hypostases.) These distinct modes of being were the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Then, when the Son became flesh and entered into the world, these two divine and human natures both remained but became *united* in the person of Jesus. This resulted in the slogan "One Nature united out of two" being used to encapsulate the theological position of this Alexandrian bishop.

According to Cyril's theology, there were two states for the Son: the state that existed *prior* to the Son (or Word/Logos) becoming enfleshed in the person of Jesus and the state that actually became enfleshed. Thus, only the Logos incarnate suffered and died on the Cross and therefore the Son was able to suffer without suffering. Cyril's concern was that there needed to be continuity of the divine subject between the Logos and the incarnate Word

—and so in Jesus Christ the divine Logos was really present in the flesh and in the world.

[edit] Mariology

Cyril of Alexandria became noted in Church history because of his spirited fight for the title "Theotokos" during the First Council of Ephesus (431).

His writings include the homily given in Ephesus and several other sermons.[21] Some of his alleged homilies are in dispute as to his authorship. In several writings, Cyril focuses on the love of Jesus to his mother. On the Cross, he overcomes his pain and thinks of his mother. At the wedding in Cana, he bows to her wishes. The overwhelming merit of Cyril of Alexandria is the cementation of the centre of dogmatic mariology for all times. Cyril is credited with creating a basis for all other mariological developments through his teaching of the blessed Virgin Mary, as the Mother of God.

[edit] In modern culture

Cyril plays a controversial role in the Arabic novel *Azazel* by the Egyptian scholar Youssef Ziedan. The novel, which won the 2009 International Prize for Arabic Fiction and will be published in English under the title *Beelzebub*, is set in 5th-century Egypt and Syria and deals with the early history of Christianity. The book has generated controversy for depicting religious fanaticism and mob violence among early Christians in Roman Egypt.[*citation needed*] The narrator, Hypa, witnesses the lynching of Hypatia and finds himself involved in the schism of 431, when Cyril deposed Nestorius. Cyril is portrayed as a fanatic who kills Jews and others who have not converted to Christianity from the traditional religions of antiquity. This portrayal has angered many Christians.[22]

Cyril has also been portrayed in Ki Longfellow's *Flow Down Like Silver, Hypatia of Alexandria*.[23] Though Longfellow does not accuse Cyril of ordering the death of Hypatia, her work does not shy away from speculating on his part in the murder.

In the 2009 film *Agora*, Cyril is played by Sami Samir as an extremist that opposes Orestes's attempts to harmonize the different communities of Alexandria.

[edit] Works

Cyril was a scholarly archbishop and a prolific writer. In the early years of his active life in the Church he wrote several exegeses. Among these were: *Commentaries on the Old Testament*,[24] *Thesaurus*, *Discourse Against*

Arians *Commentary on St. John's Gospel*,[25] and *Dialogues on the Trinity*. In 429 as the Christological controversies increased, his output of writings was that which his opponents could not match. His writings and his theology have remained central to tradition of the Fathers and to all Orthodox to this day.

- *Becoming Temples of God (in Greek original and English*
- *Second Epistle of Cyril to Nestorius*
- *Third Epistle of Cyril to Nestorius (containing the twelve anathemas)*
- *Formula of Reunion: In Brief (A summation of the reunion between Cyril and John of Antioch)*
- *The 'Formula of Reunion' between Cyril and John of Antioch*
- *Five tomes against Nestorius (Adversus Nestorii blasphemias)*
- *That Christ is One (Quod unus sit Christus)*
- *Scholia on the incarnation of the Only-Begotten (Scholia de incarnatione Unigeniti)*
- *Against Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia (fragments)*
- *Against the synousiasts (fragments)*
- *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*
- *Commentary on the Gospel of John*
- *Against Julian the Apostate*

[edit] See also

- Roman Catholic calendar of saints

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Specific

1. ^ Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 47
2. ^ *Calendarium Romanum* (Libreria Editrice, 1969), pp. 95 and 116
3. ^ Preston Chesser, "The Burning of the Library of Alexandria". http://ehistory.osu.edu/osu/archive/articleview.cfm?aid=9., eHistory.com
4. ^ Wessel, p. 34.
5. ^ John of Nikiu, 84.92.

6. ^ Socrates Scholasticus, vii.13.6-9. Wessel, p. 34
7. ^ Socrates Scholasticus, vii.13 (who says that the whole Alexandrian Jewish community was expelled); John of Nikiu, 84.95-98 (who says that only the murderers were expelled). Welles, p. 35.
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10. ^ Wessel, p. 35-36.
11. ^ Christopher Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict*, JHU Press, 2006, ISBN 0-8018-8541-8, p. 312.
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13. ^ Giovanni di Nikiu, 84.88-100.
14. ^ Maria Dzielska, *Hypatia of Alexandria*, Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1995. (Revealing Antiquity, 8), p. xi, 157. ISBN 0-674-43775-6
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19. ^ Nestorius, Second Epistle to Cyril http://www.monachos.net/content/patristics/patristictexts/34-patrtexts/189-nestorius-to-cyril2
20. ^ [a] [b] Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 47
21. ^ PG 76,992 , *Adv. Nolentes confiteri Sanctam Virginem esse Deiparem*, PG 76, 259
22. ^ Maya Jaggi, "Meeting the winner of the 'Arabic Booker'," *The Guardian* 26 March 2009 online, archived by WebCite.
23. ^ [1]
24. ^ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on Luke (1859) Preface. pp.i-xx
25. ^ Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on John, LFC 43, 48 (1874/1885). Preface to the online edition

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[edit] External links

- "The Life and Writings of Cyril of Alexandria" as it relates to the Christological Controversy
- Early Church Fathers Includes text written by Cyril of Alexandria
- Multilanguage Opera Omnia (Greek Edition by Migne Patrologia Graeca)
- St Cyril the Archbishop of Alexandria Eastern Orthodox icon and synaxarion
- Early Church Fathers: Cyril of Alexandria

Preceded by		Succeeded by
Theophilus	**Pope of Alexandria** 412–444	**Dioscorus I**