

Decius & Valerian, Novatian & Cyprian: Persecution and Schism in the Making of a Catholic Christianity - Part II

*By Joseph M. Bryant**

In Part I of this study, the Decian Persecution and the crisis of mass apostasy it provoked within mainstream Christianity was identified as a “turning point” moment in the history of the ancient Hellenistic-Roman world. A negotiated decision by moderate and pragmatic bishops to overturn the established ban on the pardoning of apostates incited a major schismatic rupture, as disciplinary hardliners and traditionalists promptly formed an oppositional communion dedicated to full compliance with the purity requirements contained in scripture. Here, in Part II, we will show how Catholics and Katharoi were caught up in a “schismogenic” process of bilateral transformation, their identities adaptively refashioned over the course of intense polemical struggle that had the decisive effect of accelerating and deepening the Catholic embrace of penitential lenity. Thus fortified by a new pastoral-disciplinary regime that restored grievous sinners to sanctity and brought the prospects of eternal salvation within reach of those less capable of sustained zeal and holiness, the Church/Orthodox Church would experience significant membership growth in ensuing decades, setting the stage for the fateful compact with Empire that lay in its future.

PART II: TRAJECTORY

Schismogenesis and the Valerian Persecution

As discussed in Part I, the “hostile tempest” of the Decian persecution left demoralizing ruin in its wake. Churches everywhere were in crisis—and in mourning—over the failure of so many of the faithful to stand resolutely against the emperor’s subtly coercive edict, which had mandated officially monitored sacrifices to the gods, but also sworn, signed, and archived attestations of lifelong religious orthopraxy. The rebuilding process would necessarily prove divisive, for the obligation to “confess Christ” carried scriptural warrant, and the offense committed was the mortal sin of idolatry.

Following the rounds of synodal conclaves that ratified the contentious policy of extending penitential absolution to remorseful apostates, and the accompanying excommunications of Novatian and his hardline supporters who condemned the new measures as violations of tradition and scripture, the partitioning of the mainstream Church into moderate and rigorist factions

*Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Toronto, Canada.

proceeded apace across “all the provinces and cities” of the empire (Cyprian, *Epistle* 55.24.2).

As the separating communities maneuver for legitimacy and organizational effectiveness, each camp will assail its adversary on those points of disagreement that had precipitated the breach, a form of focalized disputation that would elevate those issues into the distinguishing identity-markers of the competing Catholic and Katharist Churches. This “schismogenic” dynamic—a recasting of group identities out of the contested sundering of an original unity—would follow a dialectical course Marshall Sahlins has aptly styled “deviation amplification,” whereby each side valorizes its own positions through intensifying deprecation of the practices affirmed by the other.¹

The majority faction, self-identifying as “the sacrosanct Catholic Church, a regal priesthood, a consecrated multitude, a people chosen for inheritance, the great Church, the Bride adorned for the Lord God,” will invoke divine mercy and charitable reconciliation as the overriding principles of pastoral care.² The

1. Gregory Bateson, “Culture Contact and Schismogenesis,” *Man* 35 (1935): 178-183, introduced the concept to account for the socio-cultural dynamics of intra-group differentiation and separation. Insightful applications by Marshall Sahlins, *Culture in Practice* (Cambridge: Zone Books, 2000) and *Apologies to Thucydides* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), emphasize the “polarizing inversion” that occurs as the issues in dispute are contrastively elaborated over an escalating cycle of critique and counter-critique. Each of the separating groups is thereby progressively reconstituted as a contravening “anti-type” of its rival, their emerging identities anchored on a series of correlated antagonisms. A “schismogenic” schism thus entails a bilateral transformation of the seceding constituencies, which are carried to new self-understandings and adaptive arrangements over the course of their conflict. By imparting a “dialectical drive” to historical process, schismogenesis can also accelerate the pace of social change by forcing a more rapid modification of beliefs and practices than would otherwise occur, owing to pressing needs of the contending factions to rally support and justify their respective stances in the dispute. With organizational rupture, the sharpening of differences and the crystallization of reworked identities attain aroused urgency, unhindered by the more tolerant accommodations that had sustained co-existence during prior unity. The Catholic-Katharist schism manifests the pattern to a striking degree.

2. *Didascalia Apostolorum* 9.2.26: *catholica sacrosancta ecclesia, regale sacerdotum, multitudo sancta, plebs adoptata, ecclesia magna, sponsa exornata domino Deo*. This ecclesiological handbook—a pseudepigraphical “Catholic Teaching” authored by the Twelve Apostles for purposes of “confirming the faithful” against heresies to come (23.6.12)—is a much-redacted compilation of Syrian origin, dating from the third-century. As penitential issues loom large in several chapters, the possibility of anti-Novatianist interpolations has been raised, by Harnack and Bardenhewer most notably. The issue remains unsettled, but hostile references to the unnamed “opponents of leniency” bear marked semblance to the cluster of negative descriptors commonly deployed against the Katharoi. Those refusing the reconciliation of penitents are similarly condemned as “brother-hating” (*odiunt fratres*), “hard of heart and without mercy” (*duro corde et sine misericordia*), and ever keen to “expel those who have sinned, as though no repentance remained for them” (*expellere eos qui*

minority traditionalists, affirming their membership in “the Pure Church of God,” “the Holy Church of God of the Novatians,” will insist upon the abiding purity of God’s elect and the irremissibility of the *peccata aeterna*.³ The “healthy moderation” and “gentle justice” affirmed in Catholic discourse is rescinded by Katharist demands for upholding the “severity of evangelical discipline” and “banishing the wicked” from the assembly of saints, the *sanctorum coetum*.

Denunciations and recriminations are correspondingly formulated in counterpoint. Catholics are scorned as “the flattering champions and indulgent patrons of vice,” irresponsibly “converting the censures of the heavenly Scriptures into advocacy for their own crimes.” The Katharoi are denounced for their “brother-hating and most inhumane opinion” and castigated as rabid proponents of an “ingenious and novel cruelty” that would “slay the wounded by removing their hope of salvation, by denying the Father’s mercy and rejecting their brother’s repentance.” Catholics are guilty of “irreligious laxity” and “mistaken compassion”; Katharoi incur damning reproach as “destroyers of charity” and “murderers of penance.” Catholics have profanely overturned the “ancient faith” and “evangelical discipline” through their corrupting reforms, and become thereby unprincipled “prevaricators of the Gospel.” The Katharoi, having fashioned an “illicit priesthood” and raised a “counterfeit altar,” are “deserters and fugitives” from the true Church, “renegades against the peace and unity of Christ.” By readmitting adulterers, fornicators, and even apostates to full communion at the Lord’s banquet, the Catholics bring shame and deadly

peccaverunt, tamquam non relinquatur illis penitentia), 6.2.14-15. More clearly targeted denunciations follow. The faithful are warned that those “coveting primacy” and who “dare to make schism” are re-enacting the sacrilege of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, whose rebellion against Moses incurred divine retribution and consignment to hell’s eternal fires. Those schismatics, too, had “gloried in righteousness” as “puritans and sticklers for holiness.” Professing their own “purity” and of “ministering to God more zealously,” theirs was in actuality an ungodly “ministry of transgression” (23.6.1-3). When those connotative recriminations are set alongside repeated counsel that bishops should “rebuke, chastise, and restore,” and judge with “gentleness and mercy” so that the weak might “redeem their salvation through repentance,” their “multitude of sins” notwithstanding (7.2.20-21; 6.2.12-15), the evidence is strongly suggestive of redactional responses to the Decian calamity and its schismatic aftershocks. Translations from the Syriac and Latin are by R. H. Connelly, *Didascalia Apostolorum* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929). For a learned attempt to identify and date the multiple strands comprising the text’s compositional history, see Alistair Stewart-Sykes’ annotated English translation, *The Didascalia apostolorum* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009).

3. As proudly proclaimed on Novatianist funerary inscriptions: τῆς καθαρᾶς Θεοῦ ἐκκλησία; τῆς ἀγείας καθαρᾶς τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐκκλησείας; τῆς ἀγείας τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐκκλησίας τῶν Καθαρῶν; τῆς τοῦ Θεοῦ ἀγείας ἐκκλησίας τῶν Ναυατῶν, all conveniently presented in W. M. Calder, “The Epigraphy of the Anatolian Heresies,” chapter 5 in *Anatolian Studies Presented to Sir William Ramsay*, edited by W. Buckler and W. Calder (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1923), 83, 82, 76, 75.

contagion to the “virgin bride” of Christ. In callously refusing to extend the “healing medicines of penance” to their wounded brethren, the Katharoi are “rebels against the saving sacrifice of Christ” and duly marked for damnation as partisans of the “brother-hating heresy of Cain.”⁴

With both communities subscribing to the exclusivist principle of “one faith, one baptism,” the dispute over penitential standards quickly widened to encompass other ecclesiastical functions and capabilities. Stakes were raised dramatically when the contending factions—each self-identifying as the “true Church”—hastened towards a reciprocal “neutralization of the Spirit” by denying the efficacy of sacerdotal ministrations carried out by their competitor.

Upholding the traditionalist belief that one remains among God’s elect only through the continued indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, Novatian will rule that lapsed clerics are incapable of bestowing sacramental grace. The unholy restoration of apostates, moreover, spreads their sinful pestilence throughout the congregation, resulting in a comprehensive loss of the Spirit’s salvific presence; all oblations and penitential rites are rendered void thereby. Novatianist bishops were accordingly enjoined to adopt an “immunizing” policy when receiving disaffected or anxious Catholics into the Katharist fold, insuring their purity and salvation through the protective administration of a “second” but now genuinely holy baptism.

The Catholic leadership will assert its own sanctifying monopoly, denying to Novatianist clerics any capacity to possess or dispense the powers of the Spirit on the ground that schism is a “collective apostasy” from the true Church, the *Ecclesia Mater*. Cyprian’s rhetorically potent formula for the crystallizing Catholic consensus, *salus extra ecclesiam non est*, is functionally braced by the principle that the “priesthood of God” can be found only where the apostolic line of ordination remains unbroken.⁵ All ministrations by “schismatic” clerics are thus incapable of

4. These phrases of principled avowal and reciprocating invective are drawn from the following texts. Cyprian: *salubri moderatione; mitis justitia* (Epp. 55.6; 54.3); Novatian: *severitatem evangelicae disciplinae; improbo foras expuit* (Ep. 30.4; *De trinitate* 29.19); Novatian: *vitiorum assertores blandi et indulgentes patroni ... censuram Scripturarum coelestium in advocationem criminum convertunt* (*De spectaculis* 1.3); Dionysius: τῆ μισαδέλφω καὶ ἀπανθρωποτάτῃ γνώμῃ (in Eusebius, *HE* 6.43.2); Anon.: *sed ingeniosa ac nova crudelitate sauciatum potius occideret, alimendo spem salutis, denegando misericordiam patris, respuendo poenitentiam fratris* (*Ad Novatianum* 1); Novatian: *profana facilitate, misericordiam falsam* (Ep. 30.3); Cyprian: *perditor charitatis, interfecto poenitentiae* (Ep. 60.3); Novatian: *antiqua fides, disciplinae evangelicae; praevaricatores Evangelii* (Ep. 30.2, 4); Cyprian: *inlicita sacerdotia, falsa altaria; contra pacem adque unitatem Christi rebelles* (Ep. 69.1, 8), *desertoribus et profugis* (Ep. 51.1); Dionysius: ἰᾶσθαι καὶ θεοπεύειν τοῖς τῆς μετανοίας (HE 6.43.2); Cyprian: *adversus sacrificium Christi rebellis* (*De unitate* 17); Anon.: *Cainam haeresim* (*Ad Novatianum* 13).

5. “Outside the Church there is no salvation,” Ep. 73.21. Apostolic succession: the Church is founded upon an unbroken chain of ordained bishops, Ep. 33.1: *Ecclesia super episcopos constituatur, successionum episcoporum ordinatio*; Christ grants authority to the bishops who succeed His apostles through vicarious ordination, Ep. 66.4: *qui Apostolis*

bestowing grace, for the powers they malignantly command are demonic, not divine, the master they serve is not Christ but Satan.⁶

These fractious disturbances within the Christian “polity” are unlikely to have escaped the notice of Roman officials, whose responsibilities for safeguarding the public order against subversive associations ranked high on the list of surveillance priorities.⁷ The Decian fallout will have drawn particularly close monitoring, given the immense logistical effort that had been made to break the

vicaria ordinatione succedunt. Firmilian of Cappadocia, on the power to forgive sins passing from the apostles to the ordained bishops who succeed them, *Ep.* 75.16: *episcopis qui eis ordinatione vicaria successerunt.*

6. Cyprian, *De unitate* 3: heresies and schisms are the Devil’s work: *Haereses invenit et schismata, quibus subverteret fidem, veritatem corrumperet, scinderet unitatem.* A sizeable number of Catholic bishops, chiefly in the eastern provinces and north Africa, will affirm the practice of “rebaptism” for all returning heretics and schismatics—some demanding exorcisms prior—but there was opposition. During the Roman papacy of Stephen (254–57), Catholic congregations everywhere were thrown into disarray, as the imperious pontiff insisted a penitential “laying on of hands” suffices for the reconciliation of those already baptized. Cyprian, Firmilian, Dionysius, and other leading bishops roundly condemn this dictate, which Stephen defiantly answers by threatening excommunication for any cleric who perversely forces upon believers a needless “secondary washing.” Cyprian, responding, will push the monopolizing logic of his ecclesiology to the full, decrying all baptisms “outside” the true Church as consisting of waters *adultera et profana*, regardless of whether the name of Christ is invoked (*Ep.* 73.1.2; 4.2). With Stephen’s passing, the tempest over rebaptism subsided, as extensive mediation efforts led by Dionysius reaffirmed the discretionary authority of local custom to settle both general policy and individual cases (Eusebius, *HE* 7.6–7,9). The controversy did, however, result in a clearer articulation and wider endorsement of the principle that heretics and schismatics should be readmitted under different procedures: the former requiring a valid (re)baptism for the gifting of the Spirit within the true Church; the latter requiring an episcopal imposition of hands *in paenitentiam* for the renewal of the Spirit. Such was the agreement conveyed in the encyclical correspondence between Dionysius and Sixtus II, wherein the Alexandrian and Roman metropolitans likewise concur that the chief markers of heresy are twofold: a failure to invoke Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the baptismal rite (as mandated by Matthew 28.19); and the espousal of beliefs that blaspheme the Creator God or lessen the divinity of Christ. This important epistolary exchange—the rulings of which will attain canonical status at the Council of Arles in 314 and reaffirmation at the Council of Constantinople in 381—is presented in F. C. Conybeare, “Dionysius of Alexandria, Newly Discovered Letters to the Popes Stephen and Xystus,” *English Historical Review* 25 (1910): 111–114. For further details on the rebaptism crisis, see J. Patout Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop* (London: Routledge, 2002). Still unsurpassed is the monumental study by the one-time Archbishop of Canterbury, Edward Benson, *Cyprian: His Life, His Times, His Work* (New York: MacMillan, 1897).

7. On state intelligence capabilities and practices, as primarily concentrated in the specialized staffs of provincial governors, see N. J. Austin and N. B. Rankov, *Exploratio: Military and Political Intelligence in the Roman World* (London: Routledge, 1995).

offending *superstitio*. During the brief, chaotic reign of Gallus, arrests and trials continued, as did carceral martyrdoms and clerical banishments. But with plague still raging and military setbacks mounting—Shapur’s devastating campaigns in the east yielding much plunder and huge territorial gains in Syria—the Christians were effectively left to their own divisive pursuits. Gallus’ assassination by mutinous troops paved the way for the respected Valerian to assume power in September 253, and he, along with his son and co-emperor Gallienus, immediately set about restoring order and security.

To stem the crisis of collapsing frontiers, Gallienus was charged with overseeing operations against barbarians raiding along the Rhine and Danube, while Valerian directed his legions against Scythians, Goths, and Persians in the east. After years of desperate, inconclusive fighting across the empire’s porous borders, the persecution of Christians was abruptly renewed in the summer of 257. Having served alongside Decius and of similar career experience, Valerian’s dedication to the Roman order was equally resolute. Under looming threat of imperial disaster, the suppression of Christianity will have presented itself as a necessary task and sacred obligation.⁸ Nor would operational confidence have been lacking, seeing as the Decian precedent had already demonstrated the state’s formidable capacity to create apostates. Indeed, that “panoptic” policing effort—requiring both present compliance and attestations of retrospective orthodoxy—only fell short due to the unanticipated flexibility displayed by prominent leaders of the *superstitio*, who deflected the full force of the persecutorial blow by restoring to membership those who had so grievously transgressed. Valerian’s redesigned anti-Christian strategy—intended, surely, as an importuning gesture of fidelity to the gods—would prove lessons had been learned.

Where Decius employed notarized acts of public sacrifice to pressure Christians into mass defections, Valerian struck at the organizational basis of the deviant cult directly. His first edict conveyed two peremptory commands: clerics refusing participation in the traditional rites are to be banished, and all Christian assemblies and cemeterial gatherings prohibited on threat of capital punishment (Eusebius, *HE* 7.11). Dionysius, Cyprian, and scores of other defiant bishops—Catholic as well as Novatianist—were arrested and exiled. Lesser clerics and lay followers who proved obstreperous were dispatched *ad metallum* or promptly executed. A full-scale assault commenced the following summer, guided by directives of uncompromising severity: (i) summary executions for all higher clergy refusing to offer sacrifice to the gods; (ii) senators, equestrians, and high-rank officials found participating in the illegal cult to suffer immediate loss of status and property, and execution upon refusal to renounce membership; (iii) women devotees of noble status to be dispossessed of property and exiled; (iv)

8. For a perceptive account of Valerian’s religious politics, see Christopher Haas, “Imperial Religious Policy and Valerian’s Persecution of the Church,” *Church History* 52 (1983): 133-144. More fully, Patrick Joseph Healy, *The Valerian Persecution* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Company, 1905).

Christians among the freedmen and slaves of Caesar's household shall be stripped of possessions and consigned to forced labour on imperial estates.⁹

The objectives behind these measures are discernible from the targets chosen. As the adherents of Christ were known to derive overwhelmingly from the poorer and servile classes, a "dual decapitation," depriving the faithful of their elected leaders and most prosperous patrons, would paralyze congregational functioning. Though the number of Christian *senatores* and *egregii viri* is likely to have been exceedingly small at this time, converts from the propertied strata had been gaining alarming momentum, and notoriously so among the ranks of aristocratic matrons.¹⁰ Valerian's coercive *mandatum* was thus clearly designed to reverse and forestall future betrayal by members of the elite, whilst also sundering the Christian masses from the patronage supports that sustained their celebrated welfare operations. As for the punitive relegation of Christians among the *Caesariani*, a purging from palace staff of those capable of disrupting efforts to suppress the atheistic cult was an obvious necessity.

Within days of the second decree's issuance, the Roman pope Sixtus II and several of his deacons were apprehended and executed for violating the assembly ban. Other leading clerics—including the implacable foes Cyprian and Novatian—would meet similar fates, as martyrdoms from across the empire accumulated rapidly.¹¹ Out of the artful tangle of preserved memory and expansive legend that constitutes the Christian martyrological tradition, it is difficult to gauge the intensity of the persecution as it progressed over the remaining two years of Valerian's reign. But even allowing for a measure of pious padding in the various regional and local accounts, there is little reason to doubt considerable numbers of Christians perished for their faith. Of apostasies there is, tellingly, scant

9. Cyprian, *Ep.* 80.1, hastily composed upon news that phase two of Valerian's persecution had begun in the Roman capital.

10. A development confirmed by Callistus' innovative "co-habitation" policy of permitting high status women to enter monogamous *contubernium* with servile or humble brethren (c.220). Condemned by traditionalists as an inducement to fornication and abortion, the pope's dispensation astutely evaded the legal penalties of status degradation and property loss that attended marriages of unequal status. The details are scornfully reported in Hippolytus, *Refutatio Omnium Haeresium* 9.12.24 (c.230).

11. The official Roman attitude towards Christianity is succinctly captured in the charges proconsul Maximus levelled against a non-compliant Cyprian: "You have long persisted in your sacrilegious opinions (*sacrilega mente*), and with many others you have attached yourself to a nefarious conspiracy; you have set yourself up as an enemy of the Roman gods and our sacred ordinances (*inimicum diis Romanis et sacris religionibus*)."
Cyprian's brevilouquent reply to the sentence of beheading is no less demonstrative: *Deo gratias*, "Thanks be to God" (*Acta Proconsularia Sancti Cypriani*, 4.1).

mention, a likely indication of stiffening resolve by those who had passed through the Decian ordeal.¹²

Despite its strategic and tactical cogency, Valerian's attempted "top-down" dismantling would implode abruptly, and for a contingency similar to that which had diverted Decius' undertaking. While attempting to relieve Edessa from Persian siege in the summer of 260, Valerian's plague-ravaged legions were routed by Shapur's forces, the emperor himself carted off into humiliating bondage. Gallienus, his own position beset by mutinies and continued barbarian incursions, moved quickly to terminate a persecution that had encountered surprisingly stout resistance. Imperial edicts and subsequent letters to the leading bishops would grant Christians legal permission to resume their activities "without molestation," and officials were instructed to expedite the return of all properties confiscated (Eusebius, *HE* 7.13). Decades would pass before the next, and last, empire-wide persecution would be attempted.

Aftermath: Puritan Marginalization and the Catholic Ascendancy

The Decian and Valerian persecutions were pivotal episodes in the developmental trajectory of the Christian faith and the fate of Rome's empire. As set within the standard narrative—pitting a resiliently surging sub-cultural movement against a flagging imperial power—these successive "contests" are commonly thought to register the shifting strengths of the contending parties. Closer examination of the processes involved must qualify any presumptive teleology, however, for the contingencies that played into the imperial failures were not inconsequential, and the Christianity that emerged from the struggle was not the same that had entered.

In the wake of the mass apostasies induced by the Decian persecution, the mainline Church underwent a sociologically momentous bifurcation, as the penitential dispute between traditionalists and pragmatists led to a schismogenic formation of two antagonical communities, each keyed to significantly different conceptions of Christian identity and ecclesiological purpose. Most crucially, the separation of Katharoi from Catholic was accompanied by a major realignment within the ranks of the faithful, as the rival organizations appealed to fundamentally distinct constituencies.¹³

12. Attributable perhaps to the circulation of letters and preaching texts such as Cyprian's *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, which exalt the glories of imitating Christ's self-sacrifice while also warning, on the basis of abundant scriptural condemnations, that "God does not easily pardon idolaters" (*non facile ignoscere Deum idololatriis*, 5.4, c.257).

13. Sect-Church theory explicates the developmental histories of New Religious Movements in reference to changes in membership composition, which vary as a joint function of: (a) the social and psychological diversity of the available "convert pool," and (b) the changing socio-historical contexts in which conversions occur. New cults or sects

Though a quantifiable demography of the *schisma* is beyond recovery, surviving sources leave little doubt as to its historic scale: clerical testimony from across the empire is uniformly grim in reporting that vast numbers of believers fell into apostasy. Cognizant that a permanent loss of these lapsed multitudes would jeopardize the mission of the Church, Catholic leaders negotiated their way to a penitential policy of compassionately inclusive reconciliation, overturning scriptural rulings and established norms on the irremissibility of mortal sins in the process. Moderate and laxist elements would henceforth function as the stabilizing base—and overriding pastoral concern—of a reconstituted Catholic Christianity. In opposing those accommodating reforms, Novatian secured the backing of committed puritans and traditionalists whose elevated zeal imparted to Katharist churches the advantages of intensified solidarity and disciplined resolve.¹⁴

typically emerge in tension with established traditions and prevailing social hierarchies; their recruitment base is thus initially tilted towards the religiously discontented and the socially disadvantaged. In “conversionist” movements, promised rewards are usually contingent upon heightened forms of religiosity, featuring strict demands on normative-ethical conduct and intensive in-group bonding. The attainment of organizational durability through institutionalization—rituals, scriptures, clerical governance—facilitates membership growth that reaches into the middling-to-higher strata, whose worldly preoccupations and pragmatic moderation place strains on the originating ideals of purity and zealous commitment. Ensuing pastoral problems necessitate reforms that expedite the transition from a “Sect” form of religious life, wherein holiness is to be personally manifested in the lives of its spiritually empowered members, to a “Church” form, wherein holiness is objectively vested in a sacramental cultus administered by priests and recurrently dispensed to saints and sinners alike. Hence the succession of accommodating penitential reforms discussed in Part I: from the “grace period” repentance announced by Hermas for post-baptismal sins already committed, to the institutionalized single-use sacramental remission of the *paenitentia secunda*; from the contested granting of absolution for the mortal sins of fornication and adultery, to the schism-inducing decision that even idolaters and apostates are eligible for ecclesiastical reconciliation (see notes 27, 29 & 30). The Novatianist movement, viewed sociologically, represents a defensive reaffirmation of the sectarian ethos against the advance of a “universal” Church committed to the pastoral priority of restoring the wayward and fallen to salvation.

14. The Sect-to-Church process gains in clarifying specificity when conjoined with Diffusion of Innovation theory, which utilizes the S-curve “cumulative distribution function” to account for how, why, and at what rates new ideas, technologies, or cultural trends are adopted and spread. The basic pattern consists of a multi-phased succession featuring five distinctive social types: “innovators” (seekers, enthusiasts); “early adapters” (risk-taking pioneers, social marginals); “early majority” (converts of higher standing, as deviance stigmas diminish); “late majority” (trend-following moderates and conservatives); and “laggards” (hesitant traditionalists, establishment elites). Particularly germane to the Catholic-Katharoi conflict is a key finding in Richard Bulliet’s seminal *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), which convincingly establishes that the eruption of factional disputes within Islam—over issues of law,

Even on the certainty that a substantial majority of Christians remained within the Catholic fold, the rigorist dissenters attracted a following sufficient to unsettle the larger Church, her own congregations still afflicted by the pervading scandal of idolatrous trespass and now convulsed by a reproachful exodus of so many of the most resolute and dedicated recruits in Christ's army. The vehemence of Catholic alarm over Novatian's early successes—the schismatic label receiving swift amplification through envenomed charges of heresy—confirms that a self-sustaining base of support had been attained, as does the fact that the Holy Church of the Katharoi would prove viable for centuries to come, despite continuing Catholic polemic and occasional repression. Equally significant is the fact that Novatianism's appeal—in marked contrast to several other historically important Christian sects and schisms—was not restricted to select regions or enclosed ethnic and linguistic affiliations, but replicated the aspiring universalism of its Catholic derivation. Inscriptional and literary evidence confirms the wide distribution of Katharist congregations across the empire—in Spain, Gaul, Italy, Africa, Asia Minor, Syria, Cyprus, Mesopotamia, Arabia, Armenia, Egypt, even Scythia—while megacities such as Rome, Alexandria, and Constantinople would require multiple puritan churches to serve the needs of their numerous communicants.¹⁵ These are, admittedly, faded and fragmentary indicators, but their reinforcing concordance is suggestive that Novatianist membership levels—at the time of effective separation—are likely to have reached into the 20 to 30 percent range.¹⁶

theology, norms of piety—were strongly correlated with the growing demographic ascendancy of the “early and late majority” converts, who differed from and clashed with the more zealous “innovator” and “early adapter” types of the founding and preceding slower growth periods. Penitential disputes within early Christianity appear to register analogous socio-demographic shifts in its membership ranks.

15. Textual notices for Novatianist “presence” are collected in Adolf von Harnack's classic *Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums* (Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1924), Appendix I, Book IV: 928-933. For epigraphical and other indicators, see Stephen Mitchell, *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor, Volume II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993: 96-108). Vera Hirschmann's *Die Kirche der Reinen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015) provides a synthesizing survey; but see the critical review essay by Paul Mattei, *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 21, no. 2 (2017): 422-429.

16. Considering that gross exaggerations of the extent of the apostasy crisis would have discredited rather than enhanced the standing of bishops responsible for congregational oversight, their concurring testimony—that disastrously large numbers of Christians had apostatized—is eminently credible. From Cyprian's lament that “the greatest number of our brethren betrayed their faith” to Roman communiqués on “the great transgression spreading incredible devastation almost the whole world over,” the picture that emerges is one of calamitous disarray and division (*De lapsis* 4; *Ep.* 31.6.2). The wrenching penitential crisis that followed, with Novatianist “pseudo-bishops” appointed “in all the provinces and cities,” confirms how shattering the first empire-wide persecution proved to be (*Ep.* 55.24). In the flickering light of such reports, an overall

There is an anchor point to this conjecture. The historian Sozomenos reports that the Novatians, alone among the major heresies and sects, “were numerous from the beginning, and have remained so” (πολλοί τε ἦσαν ἐξ ἀρχῆς, καὶ διέμειναν).¹⁷ This emphatic identification of a “steady-state” affiliation pattern—

apostasy rate in the range of 40% is readily conceivable. As for the likely ratio of “laxist,” “moderate,” and “rigorist” dispositions prior to schism, the extensively utilized and confirmed Gaussian Normal Distribution model—a bell-shaped curve wherein a large majority of probabilities cluster mid-range in sloping descent from the apex, the remainder tapering off symmetrically toward either extreme—provides instructive guidance. Given the conspicuous activity of laxist and rigorist adherents at the start of the crisis, an approximate 25:50:25 distribution pattern is more convincing sociologically than estimates that would reduce either proclivity to inconsequential numbers. Novatian’s allies and emissaries—to reach our proposed 20-30% projection—will have needed to win over the rigorously inclined by massive margins, while offsetting recruitment shortfalls in their natural base by drawing in 5-10% of those moderates still committed to traditional moral-penitential principles. The much larger laxist-moderate alliance, correspondingly, will have coalesced quickly following conciliar rulings that granted compassionate terms of readmission to the lapsed, easily attaining a 70-80% projection. To vet these inferences, alternative distribution scenarios were considered, hypothetically raising and lowering the estimated Novatianist share. Moves in either direction are unconvincing. Posit an initial Novatianist constituency under 20%, under 15%, or under 10%, and it becomes increasingly difficult to account for: (a) the gravity of early Catholic concern and its intensive polemical recurrence for centuries to come; and (b) the continuing viability of the Katharist Church and its capacity to long sustain an empire-wide representation. Raising the Novatianist share beyond an upper limit of 30% is yet more problematic, however, as a comparable equivalency in membership numbers would have resulted in a significantly weakened Catholic/Orthodox variant, and quite possibly a commanding reassertion of the traditionalist-rigorist orientation—neither of which transpired.

17. *HE* 2.32.5 (c.445), a chronically overlooked passage. Its testimony is secured by two considerations. Unlike Sokrates Scholastikos, upon whom he relies for much of his material, Sozomenos has never been suspected of Novatianist sympathies. He invariably ranks the Katharoi among the heresies, and adds negative spin when adapting anecdotes original to Sokrates. After quoting Constantine’s famous rebuke of the Novatianist patriarch in attendance at the Council of Nicaea (325)—“Place a ladder, Acesius, and ascend alone unto heaven”—Sozomenos appends a mocking gibe that the overweening sectarians “imagined themselves free from sin” (*HE* 1.22). More revealing still, Sozomenos tendentiously trims Acesius’ fuller account to Constantine on the causes of schism to render the Novatianist position more extreme than it actually was. In Sokrates, Acesius explains that while the Katharoi deny absolution for “sins unto death,” they concur grave sinners “should be exhorted to repentance,” but only on hope that “God, not priests, might grant remission” (*HE* 1.10, c.438). Sozomenos’s hostile disposition thus renders his “numerous then, numerous now” observation all the more credible, particularly as this crucial detail is absent from Sokrates’ pro-Novatianist history. Additional sources have thus clearly been consulted for this information, lending support to Sozomenos’s claim of having examined all writings relevant to the struggles of the Catholic Church against heretics and schismatics (*HE* 1.1.16). Peter van Nuffelen, *Un héritage de paix et de piété. Étude*

extending over the course of nearly two centuries of Novatianist history—is both revelatory and convincing. Sociologically considered, the geographic spread and temporal longevity of the rigorist movement is unlikely to have been sustained by dramatic membership gains in the aftermath of the initial breach, owing to the competitive retention and recruitment advantages enjoyed by its more powerful and inclusive adversary. The Catholic Church not only commanded a larger initial following and substantially greater material resources, it could appeal to a much wider pool of potential converts on the basis of a charitable disciplinary pragmatism that immeasurably raised the salvation hopes for those less capable of abiding in protracted holiness. Breakaway minority movements, moreover, are notably vulnerable during the opening phases of a split, when early membership losses can quickly escalate to panic thresholds that trigger so-called “defection cascades.” The consolidation of the earliest Katharist congregations, in other words, must have approximated the sect’s maximal growth prospects, whilst also entailing sufficiently robust numbers to account for the durably tenacious history that followed.¹⁸

Schematic delineations of the “unitary before” and “schismatic after” are offered in Figures 1 and 2, respectively:

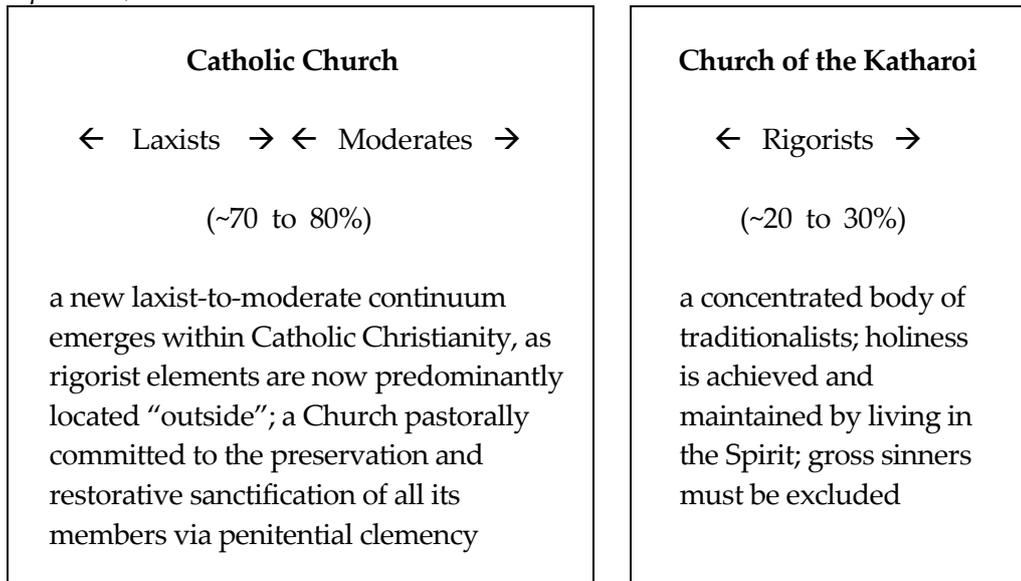
Figure 1. *Latent Factional Dispositions within the Church, Prior to Decian Persecution, c.250 CE*

Laxists	Moderates	Rigorists
(~20 to 25%)	← (~50 to 60%) →	(~20 to 25%)
tolerant, forgiving, and merciful in penitential discipline	traditionalism favoured; open to pragmatic reforms whenever justified by clerical advocacy	upholders of tradition; purity demands held to be binding; strictness in discipline

sur les histoires ecclésiastiques de Socrate et Sozomène (Löwen: Peeters, 2004), offers a richly informative comparative study.

18. When confronting shortfalls in the availability of quantifiable data for pre-modern epochs, historians can either echo the muted silences of their sources, or seek “parameters of the possible” by extrapolating from known sets of qualitative indicators. Given that real history does proceed, inexorably, in accordance with differences in scale and the weight of numbers, the “range-finding” option surely holds more promise than skirting the implications of demography altogether.

Figure 2. Factional Constituencies within the Two Churches, Following Schismogenic Separation, c.260 CE



The sociological implications of this transformative realignment are readily identified. Where laxist, moderate, and rigorist adherents had formerly counterbalanced and restrained one another within an integrated organization, the mainline Church would proceed, post-Decius, along bisected paths. The Catholic/Orthodox variant, driven polemically towards an inclusive affirmation of forgiveness and compassionate forbearance, will move to a new equilibrium centered on a laxist-moderate alliance. The Katharoi, rallying to affirm and uphold the evangelical call to purity, will anchor their faith in the unbending zeal of committed traditionalists. By thus separating and segregating these socially distinct constituencies, the schismogenic process will expeditiously reorder the “field of action” within Christianity, affording each camp the latitude to pursue policies solicitous of the needs and understandings of its own carrier group.¹⁹

19. A discerning awareness of this dialectical process is evidenced by Augustine, who affirms that the Catholic Church has been progressively “vindicated” through her “battles with heretics” (*ex haereticis asserta est Catholica*), acknowledging candidly that many “hidden truths” in scripture were first “opened” owing to disturbances caused by heretical criticisms: “Was the Trinity perfectly treated of, before the Arians railed against? Was repentance perfectly practiced, before the Novatians opposed?” (*numquid perfecte de poenitentia tractatum est, antequam obsisterent Novatiani?*, *On the Psalms* LV.21, c.418). In his catechetical manual on Christian piety, the *Enchiridion*, Augustine will offer another inventive twist to the developed Catholic polemic against rigorists, insisting that it is precisely those who deny the power of the Church to forgive sins that are “guilty of the unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit” (*reus est illo irremissibili peccato in Spiritum Sanctum*, 83, c.420).

No longer impeded by the intimidating “interior” presence of rigorists and disciplinary hardliners, Catholic Christianity is free to progressively attune its salvific program to incorporate and retain ever larger numbers of converts, which it accomplishes through pragmatic tolerance and a facilitating expansion in its sacramental means of bestowing absolution and grace to wayward members. In this reformed conception of Christianity, the formalistic criterion of unity—now carrying the authoritarian cast of perpetual loyalty to bishops of Catholic lineage—will take precedence over the substantive requirement of living in spiritual compliance with the baptismal pledge. Henceforth, even the most heroic manifestations of the faith are to be subordinated to questions of ecclesiastical affiliation, as Cyprian and his colleagues will rule that heretics and schismatics who “suffer for the Name” can earn no saving purification thereby. In the very act of separating from God’s ordained bishops, salvation is forfeit, as there can be no workings of the Holy Spirit *extra Ecclesiam*: no genuine baptisms, no healing penances, no authentic prayers, no partaking of heavenly food, nor even the inspired miracle of redemptive baptisms by blood.²⁰ Considering that the Catholic leadership had only recently decided, contentiously and divisively, to extend absolution to all the many idolatrous apostates who had declined to affirm their Saviour, this unabashed “political” usurpation of the blessings of martyrdom will have been greeted with confident derision inside Novatianist congregations.²¹

Compelled by the difficulties of defending policy innovations against the proscriptions of convention and scripture, Catholic leaders were led to reframe the discourse on sin by bringing it under the aegis of their increasingly dominant principle of institutional primacy. By claiming that the workings of the Spirit are confined to the mediating functions of a Church established in and through its apostolic episcopate, any act of defiance or rebellion against that holy order necessarily constitutes an offense of gravest magnitude. The most grievous of sins, therefore, is no longer apostasy, but schism, an act that shatters the sacred unity of the Church and fatally separates its deluded followers from the saving operations of the Spirit. In a rhetorically astute effort to counter Novatianist censure of the “patrons of indulgence” who transgress the Lord’s command by granting absolution to adulterers and apostates, Cyprian and his allies will shift the discrediting opprobrium by assimilating those hitherto unpardonable offenses with schism. For what is a “rending of the Church” if not a collective

20. A verdict chillingly rendered in *De unitate* 14: “Although they burn when given over to flames and fire, or lay down their lives when thrown to the beasts, the crown of faith will not be theirs, only punishment for perfidy; no glorious exit in religious valor, only the destruction of desperation. Such persons can be slain; they cannot be crowned” (*Occidi talis potest, coronari non potest*).

21. The Novatianist riposte on this matter has not survived the partisan hazards of textual preservation, but its central line of argument doubtless affirmed Tertullian’s earlier rigorist insistence that the “true Church” is an *ecclesia spiritus*, filled with *spiritualem hominem*, and not simply a gathering of *numerus episcoporum* (*De pudicitia* 21.16, c.218).

form of apostasy? Indeed, schism must be accounted a sin far greater than any individual failing of idolatry, seeing as it entails—so Dionysius and Cyprian will emphasize—the fall of many (*HE* 6.45.1; *De unitate* 19). Firmilian of Cappadocia will define the schismatic as “an apostate from the communion of ecclesiastical unity,” and condemns their iniquitous gatherings as “adulterous and whorish unions” incapable of begetting children of God (*Ep.* 75.24.2; 14.2). In the anonymous tract *Ad Novatianum*, the leader of the Katharoi is vilified as “an apostate from the family of God,” a raving antichrist who champions the fratricidal *Cainam haeresim* (14; 13).²² Cyprian will push this trope of semantic obfuscation with unwavering conviction. Schismatics are repeatedly denounced as “apostates” and “heretics” who split the Church and steal away her innocent children to eternal ruin, faithlessly abandoning Christ’s “chaste bride” for the corrupting allures of “adulterous unions” outside the one sacrosanct *domus Dei*. With unity his regulative principle—*unitatis sacramentum*, he affirms—Cyprian goes so far as to declare schism an offense far more destructively encompassing than idolatrous apostasy, and that it alone is an irremissible sin, a *culpa inexpiabilis* beyond the redeeming powers of either penance or martyrdom.²³

22. Authorship remains uncertain—with Sixtus II the leading candidate—but internal evidence establishes a setting in the wake of the named *Deciana persecutio*, shortly after the first persecuting decree of Valerian (*Ad Novatianum* 6, c.255). This text, the earliest salvo in a disputation that will run for centuries, lays out several key points in the Catholic line that will reappear in later anti-Katharist writings. Penitent apostates are deserving of clemency, the author insists, because they fell “not from volition,” but through the Devil’s raging attack (1). In denying penance for the lapsed, the Novatians usurp God’s exclusive right to vengeance and judgement (7; 12). Christ’s Lost Sheep and Lost Coin parables confirm that the “recovery” of sinners through repentance is Heaven’s plan and preference (15). As to the rigorist proof-text, Matt.10.32-33, on the divergent consequences of confessing and denying Christ “before men,” an audacious reinterpretation is ventured. Against the plain meaning of the Lord’s words, the author insists the “testifying moment” signifies not an earthly now, but the “future time” when all will be summoned before “Christ’s tribunal” in Final Judgement (8: *futuri temporis ... tribunali christi*). Whom shall the Saviour then deny, he asks, if not the heretics and schismatics who have betrayed His name?

23. *De unitate* 6.1-3: *Adulterari non potest sponsa Christi, incorrupta est et pudica. ... Quisquis ab Ecclesia segregatus adulterae jungitur; 7.1: unitatis sacramentum; 14.2: Inexpiabilis et gravis culpa discordiae nec passione purgatur; 19.12: Postremo lapsus martyrium postmodum consecutus potest regni promissa percipere; ille si extra Ecclesiam fuerit occisus ad Ecclesiae non potest praemia pervenire.* See also the extended discussions in *Epp.* 55, 69, 71, especially 72.2: “What greater offense can there be ... than to have rebelled against Christ ... to have scattered His Church?” In the *Didascalia* the crime of heresy is also categorized as an eternally unpardonable sin, for in twisting the words of scripture (Matt. 12.31-32), heretics simultaneously traduce the Catholic Church and commit “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit,” which the Church possesses and serves as its appointed “receptacle” (25.6.14: *susceptorium*).

The effectiveness of this Catholic counter-critique in reviving the faith and solidarity of their dispirited congregations can be presumed. Great numbers of the lapsed will have welcomed any opportunity to discharge or displace residual feelings of shame and guilt through a self-affirming castigation of those who had stood more resolutely in the recent trials of fidelity. It was reassuring, no doubt, to be told Novatianist clerics were “priests of the Devil,” ministering over the “communions of the dead” that comprised their god-forsaken and uncharitable following.²⁴ But negative campaigning against the schismatic “other” carries its own limitations, and if pursued incessantly, risks exposing the compensatory and defensive motives that drive the intensified hostility. Herein resides the social-psychological import of the Valerian persecution.

Under Decius, the coercive instrumentalities of public monitoring and certification had proven effective in forcing apostasies and fomenting organizational turmoil. Valerian’s more direct assault sought to break the offending *superstitio* by depriving the laity of their leaders and patrons, through targeted arrests, banishments, and executions for the recalcitrant. This policy too achieved a measure of success, but not in the creation of yet more apostates or schisms. Valerian’s legacy lies rather in the making of martyrs, and those of Catholic/Orthodox adherence most notably.

The celebrated martyrdoms of Sixtus II and Cyprian shone brightest in this “second contest,” but less prominent clerics from across the empire also claimed heavenly crowns, in spirited defiance of Valerian’s orders. Though the persecution struck Katharist communities as well—Novatian himself among the victims—the comprehensive targeting of clerics had the inadvertent consequence of enabling the Catholic majority to reclaim lost glory, and thereby lessen the force of ongoing censure of prior timidity. During the preceding struggle, Cyprian had speciously claimed Satan’s molestations were confined to Christians of the true Church. Schismatics, he jeered, were but “lightly touched” by persecution, for the Adversary “does not look to subvert those he has already made his own” (*Ep.* 60.3). As the toll of Catholic martyrs mounted under Valerian’s onslaught, this invidious rhetoric could now be pitched with greater confidence. Indeed, the reassertion of Catholic heroism would receive immediate polemical vindication in a text written early in 259, the *Passio Sanctorum Montani et Lucii*, which chronicles the imprisonment and martyrdoms of several Carthaginian clerics and lay supporters. In an impassioned appeal to mend the ruptured bonds of unity, one

24. These denunciations—*antistes diaboli, mortuis communicemus*—were voiced by Caecilius of Bilita and Felix of Bagai, as recorded in the minutes of the Seventh Council of Carthage, held under Cyprian’s leadership in 256. The entire transcript is filled with choice rallying slogans and curt polemical abuse, perhaps best exemplified by the following from Rogatianus of Nova: “Christ established the Church, the devil heresy. How can the synagogue of Satan possess the baptism of Christ? (*Ecclesiam Christus instituit, Haeresim diabolus. Quomodo potest habere baptismum Christi synagoga Satanae?*, *Concilia Carthaginiensia – Acta, VII: Sententiae Episcoporum LXXXVII, De Haereticis Baptizandis* [1070C]).

of the condemned confessors calls upon the arrogant schismatics to forswear their uncharitable heresy and “acknowledge the truth of the Church,” which is once again finding glorious affirmation through the “abundance of her martyrs,” her *copia martyrum!*²⁵

*

The social destinies of the two competing Churches would mirror their opposing stances on the issue that triggered the schism, as the majority Catholics continued to widen their embrace of the penitent and tolerant, while the dissenting Katharoi remained zealously intent upon strict compliance with the holiness vows of the baptismal redemption. The possibilities for future expansion lay clearly with the inclusionary variant, its growing moderation and pragmatism progressively setting the stage for an unanticipated but eventual compact between Church and State, to be brokered under the first Christian emperor.²⁶

25. *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, edited and translated by Herbert Musurillo (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), text 15.14: *haeticorum superbiam et improbam contumaciam; intelligerent ecclesiae veritatem*. Dionysius likewise reports numerous martyrs from Egypt: “men and women, young and old, maidens and matrons, soldiers and civilians, of every race and age, some from scourging and fire, others the sword” (*HE* 7.11.20; 25: mutilations and chained imprisonments). Cyprian provides a similarly grim picture for the African Church (*Epp.* 76-79).

26. As celebrated by a prominent participant: “If the highest end of the virtues looks to the advancement of the greatest number, then moderation is the loveliest of all. ... It is, moreover, the only virtue ... that has led to the propagation of the Church, by imitating the benevolence of Heaven and aspiring to the redemption of all” (*Si virtutum finis ille est maximus, qui plurimorum spectat profectum, moderatio prope omnium pulcherrima ... Denique sola est, quae Domini quaesitam sanguine Ecclesiam propagaverit, imitatrix beneficii coelestis, et redemptionis universorum*, Ambrose, *On Repentance* I.1, c.390). Pacian of Barcelona makes a coinciding claim to triumphant expansion the “clinching argument” in his disputatious colloquy with Sympronian, a Novatianist bishop. The Catholic Church, Pacian exults, is “the full body, a firm communion, now diffused throughout the whole world,” whereas Novatians are but “a small and insolent portion,” separated from the *Domus magna* “so rich in the diversity of all its vessels” (*Ad Sympronianum* III.4; 26, c.380). Pressing this “Great Church” argument further, Pacian challenges his rival to calculate the immense number of “Catholic flocks” and count upon his fingers “the swarms of our people” who are “spread the world over and fill entire regions” (*catholicos greges, nostrae plebis examina, toto orbe diffusa sunt cunctis plena regionibus*). Compared to the “surging overflow” of Catholics, is it not manifest Novatians are as “eaves-drippings in great fountains, droplets immersed in an ocean?” (*Nonne ut stillicidia, fontibus magnis? Nonne, ut ab oceano quaedam gutta, sorberis?*, III.25.3). For the fragmentary empirical evidence—onomastic data for Egypt, inscriptions for Asia Minor—indicative of substantial membership growth after the Decian and Valerian persecutions, see the cogent analysis in Mitchell, *Anatolia* (pp. 57-64),

Yet despite achieving greater worldly ascendancy, the Catholic conscience would remain haunted by the Novatianist presence for centuries to come. The taunting rebuke that Catholics were *Capitolini*—i.e., successors of the Decian apostates who had rushed forward to offer demonic sacrifices to Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, the triad of Roman deities venerated in the main temple complex of many cities—carried far too much discrediting truth for easy dismissal. Hence the repeated engagements Catholic leaders felt constrained to undertake against their unsettling competitor.

Reticus of Autun will produce a “great volume” *Against Novatian* (c.330). The philosophically-trained astronomer Eusebius, bishop of Emesa, continues the offensive with a major tome *Against Jews, Gentiles, and Novatians* (c.350). The poet-theologian Ephrem the Syrian includes the pitiless sect in his popular *madrashas* or “teaching songs” series, *Against Heresies*, aligning them with other schismatics who broke with the sacred order of apostolic succession, perverted divine truth with poisonous doctrines, and impiously named their flocks after human founders (*Hymn 22*, c.360). In his influential heresiological treatise, Epiphanius of Cyprus devotes a detailed chapter to refuting Novatianist arguments against the penitential clemency of the Holy Church, which will “accept repentance always” in faithful assurance that God the Benefactor “does not withhold the reward from those who labour in penance” (*Panarion* 59.2.6-7; 6.2, 7.6, c.375). Pacian of Barcelona composes a lengthy epistolary defence of the Catholic Church against Katharist criticisms, insisting God’s spirit-reviving gifts to the baptized—the “medicines” of confession and penitence—shall be needed and utilized until such time as “the serpent retires from this world” (*Ad Sympronianum* I.9).²⁷ Philastrius

who concludes: “Even if we accept low figures for the number of Christians in 300 ... the increase in numbers in the middle and later third century was enormous” (p. 63).

27. Pacian’s exchange with the Novatianist bishop contains much informational value, but two features merit notice here. The high-status Pacian—his son a court chamberlain to Theodosius and *praefectus praetorio* under Honorius—indirectly confirms Novatian’s martyrdom, contrary to Catholic denials. The Katharist leader “suffered ... and was slain,” Pacian concedes, but insists the arch-schismatic could not have been “crowned,” seeing as he perished “outside the peace and concord of the Church” (*passus est aliquid Novatianus, etiam si occisus, non tamen coronatu, extra Ecclesiae pacem, extra concordiam, Ad Sympronianum* II.7). There appears to have been no reciprocal Novatianist denial of martyr status for slain Catholics or other Christian sectaries—unsurprising perhaps, given Novatian’s insistence that “the entire sacred mystery of the faith resides in confessing the name of Christ” (*totum fidei sacramentum in confessione Christ nominis ... digestum, Ep.* 30.3.1). More significantly, Pacian’s lengthiest epistle was written in direct counterpoint to a “proposition-packed” *tractatus Novatianorum* sent to him by Sympronian—a fortuitous circumstance that permits a remarkably full reconstruction of Novatianist ecclesiology. The formulary of Katharist self-representation is particularly noteworthy: “The Church is a people born anew of water and the Holy Spirit, free from denying the Name of Christ, the temple and house of God, the pillar and ground of truth, a Holy Virgin of chastest feelings, the bride of Christ from his bones and flesh, having

of Brescia, in his *Catalogue of Heresies* (c.385), castigates the Novatians for disavowing God's truth that "penance allows the fallen to rise again" and denying Christ's "goodness and compassion" (82).²⁸ In *Contra Novatianum*, the anonymous Roman cleric known as "Ambrosiaster" assembles a battery of Old and New Testament verses to confute those "enemies of Christ" who would restrict God's mercy and disallow the salvation that is reclaimable through confession and penitence (*Quaestiones veteris et novi testamenti*, 102, c.385). Ambrose will write two books *On Repentance* (c.390), dedicated to a comprehensive repudiation of Katharist objections to the pardoning of mortal sins and a rousing Catholic affirmation that "God has promised His mercy to all, and grants license to His priests to release and forgive without exception."²⁹

Novatian's ghost similarly flits in and about in various orations and homilies of the great fourth-century eastern hierarchs, Gregory Nazianzen and John Chrysostom, each of whom will further articulate the Catholic/Orthodox

neither spot nor wrinkle, upholding the laws of the Gospel entire" (*Ecclesiam esse populum ex aqua et Spiritu sancto renovatum, sine negatione nominis Christi, templum et domum Dei, columnam et stabilimentum veritatis, virginem sanctam castissimis sensibus, sponsam Christi ex ossibus ejus et carne, non habentem maculam neque rugam, integra evangeliorum jura servantem*, III.2). This confident declamatory bundle, with its principled emphasis on renovation by the Spirit, faithfulness in confessing Christ, stability in truth, commitment to an immaculate purity, and dedication in full to the teachings of scripture, differs fundamentally from the catchphrases featured in the Catholic *Didascalia*, which allocates greater import to select institutional considerations, such as their "regal priesthood" and the "greatness and sanctity" of their Church (note 2, above).

28. Philastrius also offers a rare, revelatory glimpse into the "operational level" of the schismogenic conflict. Many Catholic congregations, he reports, refrained from including readings of Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews in their services, or did so only occasionally, owing to Novatianist appropriation of this text in support of penitential rigorism. Like other defenders of Catholic practice, Philastrius charges the Katharoi with misinterpreting the key verses (6.4-6 and 10.26), which, he strains to establish, only ban the repetition of baptism, not the granting of absolution for post-baptismal transgressions: *Epistola rebaptizatores excludit, non baptismum paenitentiae abnegat* (*Diversarum Hereseon Liber* 88, 89).

29. *De paenitentia*, I.3: *qui misericordiam suam promisit omnibus, et relaxandi licentiam sacerdotibus suis sine ulla exceptione concessit*. Proficient in polemic, the bishop of Milan fashions a damning association for the Katharoi by likening them to the adversaries of Christ who plotted to kill the risen Lazarus. For just as those wicked men opposed the life-restoring miracle of Christ's divine bounty, so do the Novatianists now murderously conspire against His Church, cruelly refusing the mercies whereby "the dead are restored to life" through "lenient forgiveness of their sins" (*mortuos in Ecclesia reviviscere; peccatorum indulta venia resuscitari*, II.59). Ambrose also advances the paradoxical argument—which he places in the Devil's mouth—that fallen Christians who return to the Church following genuine repentance strike the greatest blow against him, and bring yet greater glory to Jesus by exposing the destitution of "earthly feasting" in comparison to the "eternal joys" of heaven (I.26).

penitential position through principled censure of the uncompromising harshness and presumptive immodesty of the Katharoi.

As Archbishop of Constantinople, Gregory would include a memorable rebuke of the Novatians on the occasion of an Epiphany oration in 381, delivered before his congregation and select catechumens awaiting their baptismal “Illumination.” Taunting the rigorists as the “new Pharisees” who are “pure in title but not in purpose” (καθαρὲ τὴν προσηγορίαν, οὐ τὴν προαίρεσιν), Gregory faults the hardline schismatics for mercilessly violating biblical commands on reconciling the penitent and for “setting laws beyond humanity’s reach” (νομοθετῶν ὑπὲρ ἄνθρωπων). Katharist pretensions to purity are scornfully derided, with the sect’s founder personally ridiculed for his “bitter condemnation of fornication, as though he were not of flesh and body” (ὡς ἄσαρκος καὶ ἀσώματος). Gregory closes his excoriation by imploring the renegades to abandon their μισανθρωπία and rejoin the swelling ranks of the Catholic faithful: “Come, stand with us, with humanity” (Δεῦρο, στήτε μεθ’ ἡμῶν τῶν ἀνθρώπων).³⁰

Chrysostom will undertake similarly extensive labours—pastoral and exegetical—to defend and reinforce the Catholic program of compassionate clemency. In a sermon *Against the Katharoi*, the Archbishop derides as delusional their vainglorious boasting of “purity,” given the improbability of remaining sinless “even for a single day” against the myriad passions, temptations, and entanglements of this fallen world.³¹ A truly Christian life, he insists, must be lived in perpetual contrition, reckoning up offenses daily and expiating them through confession, almsgiving, and prayer, and by forgiving all wrongs against us. Neither those “freighted down with sins” nor those who have fallen into the “depths of wickedness” need despair, for these potent “medicines of repentance” remain ever accessible to those seeking forgiveness. Chrysostom will also reiterate the Catholic charge that rigorists speciously misinterpret scripture, twisting the words that prohibit remissions through “second baptisms” as if they mandated restrictions against penitential modes of spiritual renewal.³² More consequential still, where Novatian had sternly undercut the appeal of penitence, pronouncing it “a shameful testimony to sins committed” (*In Praise of Purity* 13.4), Chrysostom will elevate its practice and importance to unprecedented heights: “Repentance raises up the fallen soul ... drives away death ... restores health to the wounded ... is our mother of salvation ... a persecution for the Devil ... lifts us from earth to heaven ... makes one a communicant with God ... surpasses the angelic powers ... dissolves the bonds of sins ... is the medicine that enables us to

30. *Oration XXXIX, On the Holy Lights*: 18-19.

31. *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, PG 63.491-94 (c.400).

32. See the creative exegesis in *Homilies on Hebrews*, IX.5-8, addressing the seemingly insurmountable obstacles posed by apostolic verse 6.4-6: “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened ... if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance” (c.404).

pass from mortality to immortality” (*On Repentance*).³³ The ecclesiological corollary to this remarkably expansive characterization will find memorable expression in the third of his nine *Homilies on Repentance*: “Have you sinned? Then enter the Church and wipe away your sin. ... [A]s often as you sin, repent your sin. ... Come then, repent, for here there is a hospital, not a courtroom, not a place where punishment for sins is exacted, but where forgiveness of sins is granted” (ιατρεῖον ... οὐ δικάστηριον, οὐκ εὐθύνας ἀμαρτημάτων ἀπαιτοῦν, ἀλλὰ συγχώρησιν ἀμαρτημάτων παρέχον).³⁴

This polemical discourse would long continue. Jerome will yoke the Katharoi with the heretical Montanists as inveterate opponents of penitential compassion, alike damnable for their hardened refusal to pardon sins against the Holy Spirit and, purportedly, even lesser offenses.³⁵ Vincent of Lerins, in his *Commonitorium* against heresies (c.440), will denounce “the most cruel” Novatian for his blasphemous depiction of a “cruel God” who prefers the deaths of sinners to their spiritual restoration and redemption (24.62). Even as late as the dawn of the seventh century, the puritan challenge still rankled and disturbed, as indicated by the apparent need for six books *Against the Novatians* (c.605), authored by Eulogius, Patriarch of Alexandria.

Nor was Catholic aggression confined to textual warfare. Exploiting the new working alliance with a Christian-led imperial state, several of the more combative prelates took advantage of anti-heresy legislation to launch persecutions that resulted in property confiscations and the closure or demolition of Novatianist churches.³⁶ Notable instances would occur in Rome under the direction of

33. Περὶ μετανοίας, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, PG 60.765-68.

34. Λόγος περὶ μετανοίας, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca*, PG 49.297-98.

35. In *Against Jovinianus*, Jerome attempts to “neutralize” the rigorist reading of Hebrews 6.4-6 by quoting verses 9-10, on God’s justice in rewarding those who show love for his Name and charitable care for his Saints (II.3, c.393). In his epistolary treatise *To Pammachius, Against John of Jerusalem*, Jerome denounces the Novatians for their inhumanity towards the fallen and their impossible demands for perfectionism given the pervasiveness of sin in everyday life: *Facessat itaque Novatus errantibus non manus porrigens... Quotidie peccamus omnes et in aliquo labimur*, 2.1, c.398 (see also *Epistles* 41, 42, 77).

36. The Katharoi were placed in perpetual jeopardy—and endured periodic harm—through a series of laws that imposed punitive restraints upon “every sect inimical to the Catholics,” as well as specific rulings targeting them by name (*Codex Theodosianus* 16.5.64). In the opening entry of the Code’s *De Haereticis* section, all heretical and schismatic sects are excluded from the many privileges and benefactions Constantine gifted the Church, including: state-financed construction of basilicas, baptisteries, and martyr shrines; land grants, grain subsidies, and monetary subventions for operational and charitable purposes; tax immunities; clerical exemption from compulsory public services; juridical powers for bishops in civil cases, etc. Imperial patronage on such a scale raised the status and material benefits of Church membership considerably, widening its appeal to potential converts, pagan and sectarian. Persecutorial measures, in turn, rendered

Innocent I (c.410) and Celestinus (c.425), and in Alexandria under Cyril's dictates (c.412). Leontius of Ancyra had earlier deprived the Novatians of their churches throughout Galatia (c.400), citing in justification their "cruel opposition" to penance and God's mercy. Chrysostom carried out similar actions across Ionia and Lydia (c.402), but his threats to forcibly suppress "heretical preaching" in the imperial capital appear to have been frustrated by senatorial backing for the popular Katharist patriarch, Sisinnius.³⁷

Conclusion

In sociological hindsight, polemical and repressive measures against the Novatianist sectarians may appear misguided, as puritan causes tend to be self-limiting, their base of appeal inherently restricted to those distinctively fervent minorities drawn to what Max Weber called "heroic" or "virtuoso" religiosity. The Church of the Katharoi would long endure; it could not appreciably expand. Yet the contest between the two rivalrous churches was never really about recruitment gains. At issue was the very meaning of Christian identity and ecclesiological purpose, and wherein resided God's salvific grace and Holy Spirit. The lasting socio-historical significance of this schismatic rupture lies precisely here. For in working out a pastoral and theological rationale for the restoration of the Decian lapsed, the Catholic Church had adventitiously hit upon a world-

membership in the "perfidious heresies" and "sectarian monstrosities" more difficult to sustain. These included periodic bans on assemblies, prohibitions against "fraudulent mysteries," property seizures, expulsions for heretical preaching, ineligibility for high civic and military offices, legal disabilities in bequeathing or inheriting property, and even threats of execution (*CTh* 16.5.4, 6, 11-12, 14-15, 19-20, 29, 40, 42, 48, 51, 59-60, 63-65). Particularly damaging to Novatianist proselytizing efforts were interdictions on the recruitment of Catholics by any of the "diverse and perfidious" sects, punishable by fines, forfeiture of testamentary rights, and exile: "Let none be abducted through the crime of rebaptism, nor shall any attempt be made to pollute those who have been initiated into the rites of the Orthodox with the mire of profaned religions and the filth of heretics" (*Nullus rebaptizandi scelus adripiat nec eos, qui orthodoxorum ritu fuerint initiati, caeno profanatarum religionum haeticorumque sordibus polluere moliatur*, 16.6.6; also 16.5.5: rebaptism condemned as a rescindment of the gifted "eternal redemption" in exchange for "renewed death," *reparata morte*).

37. These incidents are reported by Sokrates (*HE* 7.9, 11; 7.7; 6.11, 19, 22), who also notes that Catholics and Katharoi—owing to their shared Nicene "*homoousion*" orthodoxy regarding the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—were alike persecuted during periods of Arian ascendancy. On one notorious occasion, in 356, Arian bishops obtained Constantius' permission to deploy imperial troops against Novatianist communities across several provinces and cities, unleashing a rampage of repressive violence that included church demolitions, mass slaughter, imprisonments, and forcible rebaptisms under torture (*HE* 2.38).

winning formula that would permit a far-reaching reorganization of the Christian experience, its sustaining axis no longer turning on “living in the Spirit,” but in providing restorative access to it.³⁸

Turning point and trajectory? Absent the dialectical sequence of social and cultural transformations that flowed into—and through—the commanding actions of Decius and Valerian, Novatian and Cyprian, the arrival of a Constantinian moment might well have missed its fateful juncture.³⁹

38. The enduring Catholic-Katharist opposition—and its underlying basis in socially distinct ecclesiologies—is well captured in a telling anecdote from Sokrates. Sisinnius, he reports, authored a book against Chrysostom, faulting the Archbishop for having colluded with recidivist sinning in one of his sermons. Chrysostom’s offense? To have extended the following open-ended invitation to habitual backsliders: “Come, enter, though you may have repented a thousand times before” (Χιλιάκις μετανοήσας εἴσελθε, *HE* 6.21). To appreciate the immense distance the Great Church had travelled—in thought, attitude, and practice—we need only recall Clement of Alexandria’s sharp-edged observation from two centuries earlier, that Christians who repent repeatedly differ in no way from unbelievers, other than in their awareness they are committing sins (αἱ δὲ συνεχεῖς καὶ ἐπάλληλοι ἐπὶ τοῖς ἀμαρτήμασι μετάνοιαι οὐδὲν τῶν καθάπαξ μὴ πεπιστευκότων διαφέρουσιν ἢ μόνῳ τῷ συναίσθησθαι ὅτι ἀμαρτάνουσι, *Stromata* 2.13, c.200).

39. The analytical utility of the “turning point” and “trajectory” concepts is insightfully explored by Andrew Abbott in chapter 8 of his *Time Matters: On Theory and Method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). See also Randall Collins, “Turning Points, Bottlenecks, and the Fallacies of Counter-Factual History,” *Sociological Forum* 22 (2007): 247-269. As to the importance of the “timing” of the first imperial conversion, I have argued elsewhere that Christianity’s fate would have been significantly altered by the arrival of a “later” Constantine (see Bryant, “Ashoka and Constantine: On Mega-Actors and the Politics of Empires and Religions,” in *States and Nations, Power and Civility*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019). Beyond the immense material benefactions and preferential policies the first Christian emperor bestowed upon the Catholic/Orthodox Church (see note 36), Constantine was also the driving force in terminating, by the year 313, the “Great Persecution” of Christians that had been launched by the emperor Diocletian a decade earlier. The timeliness of those interventions is indicated by the fact that the religion to which he converted was still very much a peripheral, minority movement, comprising no more than an estimated 10% of the empire’s population, with even less representation inside the army and high officialdom, the two dominant institutions of power. Over the course of an unusually lengthy reign (303-37), Constantine would initiate a radical reversal in state policy—from persecution to patronage—that would gradually but inexorably transform the Roman-Hellenistic world into a Christian empire. Had that revolutionary empowerment been appreciably delayed, it is entirely conceivable that Christianity might have long remained a socially marginal cult, holding on in heroic fortitude at least up to that cataclysmic time when surging inflows of “pagan” warrior tribes would bring about the fall of a still “un-Christianized” Roman empire, and on that basis usher in a new epoch of civilizational transformation.

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