



[Cyprian, On the Lapsed XXVII](#)

Christians who have acquired fake certificates of pagan sacrifice

Name of the author: Cyprian of Carthage

Date: 251 CE

Date: 3d CE

Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Rhetorical treatise

Title of work: On the Lapsed

Reference:

XXVII

Commentary:

For a general introduction to Cyprian, please see the commentary on his [Epistle LXXXI](#).

In 249 CE the emperor Decius issued an edict requiring that all inhabitants of the empire sacrifice to the Roman gods. The edict itself is lost, and so our knowledge of its contents and effect comes from the sources either reacting to it, or evidencing its implementation. For example, we possess numerous *libelli* (or “certificates/attestations”) on papyrus, which document the performance of sacrifice by certain individuals (see [Papyrus Rylands 12](#) and [112a](#) for two examples; for a bibliography of studies of Decius’s edict, see James Rives, “The Decree of Decius,” p. 137, n. 10). The edict was issued shortly after Decius became emperor, and was apparently a formal edict issued directly to the public (the above extract uses the term *edictum*). While scholars have debated how much Decius’s edict had to do specifically with Christians at the outset (possibly it had nothing or very little to do with them), it is natural that the Christian sources frame it as a “persecution,” as not only would it have felt this way to those diehard believers who were punished for refusing to comply, but as with other instances where Christians were executed by Rome, the example of these steadfast believers provided excellent propaganda material for Christian authors seeking to promote Christianity’s integrity and legitimacy. As John Knipfling has stated, the nomenclature of the *libelli* we possess “[show] that Decius’ original edict...had been framed in general terms, with the command that all inhabitants whether Christian or pagan, citizen or non-citizen, male or female, major or minor, should sacrifice to the gods, a command which served as a model for two later edicts of the persecution of Diocletian, namely, the fourth edict of the year 304 and the fifth of the winter of 305-306” (“The Libelli,” p. 362). Rather than the edict being a measure which specifically targeted Christians, James Rives agrees with the likes of Géza Alföldy, who argues that it fits into a broader third-century picture of seeing the traditional gods as the answer to Rome’s problems (Géza Alföldy, “Die Krise des Imperium Romanum”; James Rives, “The Decree of Decius,” p. 142).

The church responded in a variety of ways to Decius’s requirement for universal sacrifice, and the present extract from Cyprian’s treatise *On the Lapsed* (*De Lapsis*) details the particular solution which some Christians employed to avoid actually having to perform the sacrifice, while still protecting themselves from the potential punishments for not doing so. Their tactic was to procure for themselves false *libelli*, thereby fooling the authorities into believing that they had sacrificed. These Christians were termed as the *libellatici*, and were distinguished from the *sacrificati*, which referred to Christians who simply chose to perform the sacrifice (for this latter group, see chapter [VIII](#) of the present treatise).

Cyprian describes in this treatise various groups of “lapsed” Christians, who have in his view defiled their conscience and betrayed their faith by either rushing to sacrifice to the Roman gods of their own accord, giving in and sacrificing after suffering imprisonment and torture, or, as we see here, attempting to trick the Roman authorities into believing they had sacrificed. While this latter group have not physically performed the sacrificial act, for Cyprian they are no better than if they had in fact done so. The obtaining of a false certificate of sacrifice is for Cyprian tantamount to openly denying Christ. The individual has effectively obeyed the edict of Decius by pretending he or she has sacrificed, and therefore has attempted to “serve two masters,” God *and* the emperor



(Matthew 6:24). The very act of *appearing* to appease the emperor when his request requires something incompatible with God's law is just as treacherous as committing the act itself; as such, God will enact his judgement on such individuals. Cyprian quotes scripture (the Psalms) to emphasise that God sees and cares more about what is inside a person's heart (figuratively speaking of course) than any outward actions. This must have seemed somewhat ironic to some Christians who had chosen to use a false certificate, as this decision, rather than simply performing the sacrifice, was likely for many done with the belief that God would know their true beliefs. Indeed, we know from Cyprian's letters that "lapsed" Christians were eager to be forgiven by the church afterwards, as we read on several occasions of such individuals receiving a *libellus pacis* (a certificate of peace), which effectively cancelled out the effect of a fake certificate of sacrifice, and reconciled the individual with the church. For instance, *Epistle XIII.2*: "they who have received a certificate from the martyrs, and can be assisted by their help with the Lord in respect of their sins...when they have made confession, and have received the imposition of hands on them by you in acknowledgment of their penitence, should be remitted to the Lord with the peace promised to them by the martyrs."

That some Christians were choosing to respond to Decius's edict with these false certificates of sacrifice might reveal something to us about their understanding of their identity as Roman citizens (in addition to their identity as Christians). Allen Brent argues that those Christians whom Cyprian describes as willingly sacrificing did so out of a sense of "patriotic duty," and a desire to be part of imperial unity which was hoped would triumph over the metaphysical chaos believed to be responsible for many of the problems the empire was facing in the third century (*Cyprian and Roman Carthage*, p. 225-227). Perhaps for the *libellatici*, however, apart from or in addition to a likely fear of punishment, their choice reflects a desire to minimise tension between themselves and their society. While Cyprian and others saw it as the noblest option, martyrdom would not be an attractive option to most, many of whom likely wished to appear as good, law abiding citizens.

Keywords in the original language:

- [crimen](#)
- [dominus](#)
- [ecclesia](#)
- [edictum](#)
- [imperium](#)
- [libellus](#)
- [sacrificium](#)
- [saecularis](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [certificate](#)
- [confessor](#)
- [Decius](#)
- [denier](#)
- [edict](#)
- [idol](#)
- [persecution](#)
- [Roman emperor](#)
- [sacrifice](#)

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[Cyprian, On the Lapsed VIII](#)

The eagerness of lapsed Christians to sacrifice under the Decian edict

- [Read more about Cyprian, On the Lapsed VIII](#)

Papyrus

[Papyrus Rylands 112a](#)

Certificate of pagan sacrifice from the Decian persecution

Language English

- [Read more about Papyrus Rylands 112a](#)

Papyrus

[Papyrus Rylands 12](#)

Certificate of pagan sacrifice from the Decian persecution

Language English

- [Read more about Papyrus Rylands 12](#)

Realized by:

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