Erasmus’ Esteem for Cyprian: Parallels in Their
Expositions of the Lord’s Prayer*

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1. Introduction

For more than a generation, scholars have studied Erasmus as an editor, student, and critic of the Church Fathers.1 Despite the great interest in the relationship between Erasmus and Jerome,2 a book-length study of the subject has not yet appeared. Well known are the books of Charles Béné and André Godin on the influence respectively of Augustine and Origen on Erasmus.3 Irena Backus has studied Erasmus as a translator of Basil of Caesarea, and

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Robert Sider has investigated the place of John Chrysostom in Erasmus' New Testament scholarship. 4

Within the context of patristic influence on Erasmus, the North African Father Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, has received no sustained treatment. 5 At the end of July 1519, three years after Froben published his edition of Jerome, Erasmus addressed to Cardinal Lorenzo Pucci the prefatory dedication of his edition of the complete works of Cyprian. Froben's press in Basel produced this edition in February 1520. Froben would reissue Erasmus' edition of Cyprian's Opera in 1521, 1525, and 1530. Given Erasmus' well-known admiration for Jerome, the preface to Cyprian's works contains a remarkable sentence. Erasmus admitted to his readers: "For myself, I cannot deny that among orthodox writers I used to give first place to Jerome; but when I looked more closely into Cyprian, whom previously I had read at random and without attention, doubt at once assailed me which I should prefer; so true is it that each with his own special virtues makes an overwhelming impression." 6 In style of speaking, Erasmus claims, Cyprian "far outstrips Jerome, being everywhere more serious and less artificial." 7

We should not attribute too much importance to this compliment, for Erasmus continued to admire Jerome. Neither, however, should we dismiss Erasmus' esteem for Cyprian, which went beyond the Church Father's eloquence. As Backus reminds us, Erasmus completed his edition of Cyprian at


6CWE 7:28.