THE DE MORTALITATE OF CYPRIAN:
CONSOLATION AND CONTEXT

BY

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I

The publication in 1937 of Charles Favez’s monograph, La Consola-
tion latine chrétienne, opened up a new horizon in the study of ancient
consolatory literature. Though this subject had been one of recurring
interest to scholars during the previous hundred years, Favez was the
first to pay serious attention to the Christian contribution to the genre,
and to consider both its relation to and, in particular, its differences
from, the consolatory writing of pagans such as Cicero, Seneca, and
Plutarch. His approach was essentially synchronic. Themes, topics,
expressions, materials found in those Christian texts which formed the
basis of his study were brought together in such a way as to create a
composite picture of Christian consolation, which could be compared
as a whole with the pagan literature. That such an approach has limita-
tions is clear. Favez also drew on a relatively narrow range of texts. As
its title suggests, the book does not consider Christian consolatory
writing in Greek, nor does it deal comprehensively with Latin work. But
it remains a fundamental study, an essential starting-point for
anyone working in the field.

The book is founded on the work of four authors: Jerome, ten of
whose letters may broadly be classified as consolatory, Ambrose, from
whom we have two letters of consolation, and funeral orations for his
brother Satyrus and the emperors Valentinian II and Theodosius I;
Paulinus of Nola, author of a letter to the Christian senator Pam-
machius on the death of his wife Paulina, and of a consolatory poem
to Pneumatius, a relative by marriage; and Cyprian, whose De mor-
talitate, a sermon or tract addressed to the Christian community at Car-
thage, is presented by Favez as the earliest Christian consolation in
Latin. The diversity of these texts is indicative of the difficulties we face
in defining a consolatory genre; even the letters are highly individual in
character, some of them containing little strictly consolatory or
exhortatory material, or possessing other overriding aims. We can
perhaps do no better than to classify as consolatory those texts in which the consolation of the bereaved is one of the author's purposes. For the most part they draw on a relatively limited common stock of topics and arguments, a repertoire expanded and adapted by the Christians in accordance with Christian belief, but often displaying firm links with the pagan tradition.

Of the texts chosen by Favez as material for his study, the De mortalitate of Cyprian stands out from the rest in a variety of respects. It predates every other work under scrutiny by more than a century. It does not respond to the death of a particular individual, but to the troubles facing a whole community, including mass bereavement. It stands neither in the epistolographic tradition, nor in that of epideictic oratory. And as we shall see, the tone of the consolatory portions of the work is much more stark than is normal in the fourth- and fifth-century material.

Favez's inclusion of the De mortalitate in his book gave it a firm place in the history of ancient consolatory writing. But his treatment of it was later met with a number of criticisms. Thus Alfred Stuiber in 1955:

Mit der Schrift De mortalitate hat Cyprianus das antike Genus der Trotschrift in die christ.-lat. Literatur eingeführt (hierzu Ch. Favez ... der freilich die Unterschiedlichkeit zu andern, von den antiken Gattungstopoi stärker geprägten christl. Consolationes nicht genügend ins Licht stellt ...).16

Another aspect of the difference between the De mortalitate and later patristic Latin consolation was stressed by Peter von Moos in 1971, in his huge work on the medieval consolatio. Associating the De mortalitate, by reason of its stern and rigorous attitude towards the expression of grief, with the letter of an unknown author to one Turasius on the death of his daughter, which he was inclined to date to the end of the third century, von Moos wrote of a climate of 'Christian Stoicism' lying behind Cyprian's sermon, and criticised Favez's view that one of the features which distinguished Christian from pagan consolation was the dominance in the former of feeling over reason: the early patristic evidence would not permit so general a conclusion. The judgements of both Stuiber and von Moos contain something of the truth. But, as I shall hope to show, the picture they present is in certain respects misleading and inaccurate. My aim in this paper is to take a fresh look at the De mortalitate and to consider how its consolatory character can