

**THE TREATISE OF
NOVATIAN, ON
THE TRINITY**

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The treatise of Novatian, On the Trinity by Herbert Moore

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HERBERT MOORE

**THE TREATISE OF
NOVATIAN, ON
THE TRINITY**

TRANSLATIONS OF CHRISTIAN
LITERATURE. SERIES II
LATIN TEXTS

THE TREATISE
OF NOVATIAN
ON THE TRINITY

By HERBERT MOORE MA.

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THE TREATISE OF NOVATIAN "ON THE TRINITY"

INTRODUCTION

I. *Novatian and the Novatianists*

NOVATIAN (called by Greek writers, who do not distinguish him from Novatus of Carthage, *Noováros*, *Nováros*, or *Naβáros*) was a presbyter of the Roman Church in the middle of the third century.¹ He had been trained in the Stoic philosophy, and was apparently not converted until he reached manhood. It was said in disparagement of him that he had been baptized on a sick bed and had not, at least on that occasion, been confirmed. As a leading presbyter at Rome he enjoyed a great reputation. Pope Cornelius speaks of him as "this remarkable man," "this most illustrious man."

In the year A.D. 250, Fabian, the Bishop of Rome, was martyred; for natural reasons of prudence, the See was not filled for fifteen months, its affairs being managed by the fifty-three clergy of Rome. Among these, Novatian's abilities had won him such a high position, that he was appointed to issue letters in their name, and seemed likely to be the next bishop. But the choice of the clergy fell upon Cornelius. Hereupon,

¹ This account is drawn from Cornelius's letter in *Eus. Hist. Eccl.* vi. 43; *Socr. Hist. Eccl.* iv. 28, and Cyprian's letters about Novatian.

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a strong minority persuaded Novatian to accept consecration, from three Italian bishops, as a rival bishop; the question dividing the two parties being one which involved the whole disciplinary powers of the Church—"the power of the keys."

As the Church is a great society, it has the right to expel any members who break its rules of conduct or of faith, and also to readmit them on its conditions of repentance and amendment being fulfilled; this power it exercises through its officers, the bishops and priests. Excommunicated persons had long before Novatian's time been so readmitted, at least when at the point of death, and the principle was gradually widened, so that even those who had been grievous sinners, and were in no danger of death, could again enjoy Church privileges; while the power of granting readmission was extended to "Confessors"—those who had stood firm for Christ during persecution.¹ But there always was a strong body of opinion in the Church that grievous sins, including apostasy from the faith, could not be absolved, but must be left to God's uncovenanted mercies.

Now in the persecution which began under Decius, many had escaped martyrdom by offering incense to the heathen gods or surrendering their sacred books, and when it ceased desired to be accepted again as Church members, offering to do penance or obtaining letters from Confessors. Cyprian of Carthage, the ablest bishop of the time, at first held that the Church could not readmit such persons, though he himself had avoided martyrdom by flight; but afterwards he adopted

¹ A martyr would leave behind a letter interceding for some one, to which weight would naturally be attached. The Confessors, who were willing to die though the supreme sacrifice had not been demanded of them, claimed the privileges of martyrs.

the milder view. To exclude men for ever from the Church, he said, means to anticipate God's judgment and deny His mercy. Let the lapsed or sinful Christian be absolved, and readmitted after due penance, leaving it to God to rectify any mistake. The tares must ever be mingled with the wheat.

Nay, said Novatian's party. The Church is a body of saints, and saints only. The admission of a sinner defiles her and spreads contagion. To keep her pure, grievous sinners must be permanently excluded; the few must suffer for the good of the many.

Thus Novatian adopted an impossible ideal of a perfectly pure Church, and his sect received the name Cathari, or Puritans; and like modern Puritans, who have left the Church as falling short of their ideal of a community composed only of holy persons, they took a severe view of what constitutes sinfulness, condemning many things which the Church regarded as being inevitable and innocent accompaniments of our life on earth.

This was in part due to the influence of the African writer Tertullian. The characteristic of the African Church was a certain gloomy severity; Tertullian's legal training had predisposed him in this direction, and he used his great powers of argument, sarcasm and invective, to urge his views. Novatian's writings, in style, doctrine and general view of the meaning of Christianity, show him to have been a great admirer of Tertullian; and as in all parts of the Christian world there were many who held his views of a perfectly pure Church, his sect made rapid headway. He was excommunicated by a synod of bishops, but the Cathari maintained that they, and not the others, were the true, the pure Church. They continued to exist under their own bishops for some three hundred and fifty years, and then passed

away. The sect was especially strong in Phrygia. Nothing is known of Novatian's later life; he is said to have suffered martyrdom under Valerian in 257.

II. Literary Activity

Novatian, according to Jerome (*De Vir. Illustr.* 70) "wrote, *On the Passover, On the Sabbath, On Circumcision, On the Priesthood, On Prayer, On the Food of the Jews, On Zeal, On Attalus*, and many others, especially a great volume, *On the Trinity*, a sort of epitome of the work of Tertullian, which many mistakenly ascribe to Cyprian." Jerome also speaks of a collection of Novatian's letters (*Ep.* x. 3). Novatian addressed circular letters to the Church on subjects connected with his schism, and two of his letters appear among Cyprian's (xxxii. and xxxv.). The preservation of a heresiarch's writings is due to their inclusion among the writings of Tertullian and Cyprian. *De Cibis Judaicis* and *De Trinitate* were ascribed to Tertullian, and some of the Cyprianic collection are now believed to have been written by Novatian, especially *De bono Pudicitiae* and *De Spectaculis*. The dates of his treatises are unknown, but *De Trinitate* was probably written well before 250, and was the cause of his high reputation.

III. *De Trinitate*

It is hard to believe that the author of the treatise *On the Trinity* was simply an ambitious schemer, who adopted a popular theory to secure his own advancement. We may give him credit for having acted from the same zeal for the good of the Church and the glory of God which had led him previously to use his great abilities as a writer to explain the Catholic faith, his devotion to which was perfectly sincere. Religious speculations, some wild and fanciful, others deeply