

Tertullian

Father of Latin Theology, Enemy of Compromise

A source-first historical biography

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1 A Master Cited but Never Canonized

The Catholic Church still prays in words it learned from Tertullian. When the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* introduces the Lord's Prayer, it reaches back to his treatise *On Prayer* for the description of the Our Father as "the summary of the whole Gospel" (CCC 2761, citing *De oratione* 1). The Latin theological vocabulary of the Trinity—one substance, three persons—enters Christian speech in his tract against Praxeas. His epigram that the blood of Christians is seed has been quoted for eighteen centuries. Yet Tertullian has no feast day, no cult, no shrine, and no title of Saint or Doctor. Jerome, writing about a hundred and seventy years after him, says he "lapsed to the doctrine of Montanus"; Augustine catalogued a small sect of *Tertullianistae* that survived in Carthage almost to his own day. When Pope Benedict XVI devoted a catechesis of his series on the Fathers to Tertullian on 30 May 2007, he presented him as both the founder of Latin Christian literature and a cautionary figure who ended outside the communion he had defended.

This biography asks what the sources actually establish about that double memory. Three questions govern it. First, what can be known—and what cannot be known—about the life of the man himself, once the late notices of Jerome and Augustine are weighed against what Tertullian says and fails to say about himself? Second, how did one converted rhetorician in Severan Carthage come to supply Latin Christianity with so much of its working language for God, Christ, church, sacrament, and conscience? Third, did he really leave the Church? The received story of a dated "Montanist secession" has been substantially reopened by modern scholarship, and this study preserves that disagreement rather than resolving it by fiat.

The method is that of the whole series: earliest controlled evidence first. Tertullian's own works are the primary witness, but they are advocacy and self-presentation, not a diary; the biographical notices of Eusebius, Jerome, and Augustine are received tradition written generations later; medieval and modern portraits are reception, not testimony. Each class is kept visible as the account proceeds, and the terminal appendix states the conventions, chronology, and limits that govern every page. Because the works are almost the whole evidence, the corpus itself is treated as a primary object of study: an inventory of all thirty-one surviving treatises, each consulted at a verified locus, stands early in the book, and the story of how those treatises themselves barely survived—at several points in a single manuscript—is told with the reception.

2 Carthage: A Church First Heard in a Courtroom

2.1 The second city of the Latin West

Tertullian's city was the second metropolis of the Latin West. Roman Carthage, rebuilt on the ruins of its Punic predecessor, was the seat of the proconsul of Africa, a grain port feeding Rome, and a famous school town whose rhetoricians and lawyers competed with those of the capital. Latin was the language of its public life, Greek the language of much of its learning, and beneath both lay Punic and Libyan populations whose presence in the churches can be glimpsed but not measured. Tertullian himself, in the one work he devoted to his own city, opens with a flourish that assumes the whole civic self-image: "Men of Carthage, ever princes of Africa, ennobled by ancient memories, blessed with modern felicities" (*On the Pallium* 1). The proconsul's tribunal, the amphitheatre, the schools, and the temples that frame his sentences were the daily furniture of his readers' lives.

Christianity in Africa has no recorded founding. It first appears in the documentary record already Latin-speaking and already on trial.

How the faith reached Africa—from Rome, from the East, by trade, or by several routes at once—is not recorded by any ancient source. Reconstructions from language, liturgy, or the African churches' later ties to Rome are modern inference, not evidence. The origin is simply unknown.

2.2 The Scillitan martyrs, 17 July 180

On 17 July 180, twelve Christians from the small town of Scilli stood before the proconsul Vigellius Saturninus: "When Praesens, for the second time, and Claudianus were the consuls, on the seventeenth day of July, at Carthage, there were set in the judgment-hall Speratus, Nartzalus, Cittinus, Donata, Secunda and Vestia" (*Acts of the Scillitan*

Martyrs 1). The court record of their trial is the earliest securely dated Christian document from Africa, and among the earliest dated Christian texts in Latin. Its exchanges compress the whole legal and religious collision into a page. Asked what was in the travelling-case the accused carried, “Speratus said: Books and epistles of Paul, a just man”—the apostle’s letters already in circulation, in the luggage of provincials from a town so small its site is now unknown. Asked to swear by the genius of the emperor, the same spokesman answered, “The empire of this world I know not; but rather I serve that God, whom no man hath seen, nor with these eyes can see.” When the sentence came—“it is determined that they be put to the sword”—the reply was “We give thanks to God” (*Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*). Nothing in the record says in what language Speratus’s books were written; but the proceedings themselves are in Latin, and they exhibit, a generation before Tertullian wrote, a Latin Christianity articulate under interrogation.

2.3 Perpetua’s world, 203

A generation later the persecution reached the city’s own catechumen class, and produced the second foundation document of African Christianity. In 203 “there were apprehended the young catechumens, Revocatus and Felicity his fellow servant, Saturninus and Secundulus. With them also was Vibia Perpetua, nobly born, reared in a liberal manner, wedded honorably,” a matron “about twenty-two years of age” with an infant at the breast (*Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* 2). The *Passion* that records their deaths in the amphitheatre of Carthage is unlike any earlier Christian text: its unnamed editor states that the central portion is Perpetua’s own prison diary—“What follows here shall she tell herself; the whole order of her martyrdom as she left it written with her own hand and in her own words” (*Passion* 2)—which makes it among the earliest surviving first-person writing by a Christian woman. The diary’s opening scene distils the whole legal situation of the African church into a household argument. Her father begs her to recant; she points to a jug: “Father, said I, Do you see (for examples) this vessel lying, a pitcher or whatsoever it may be? . . . Can it be called by any other name than that which it is? And he answered, No. So can I call myself nought other than that which I am, a Christian” (*Passion* 3). It is the Scillitan confession again—the name that cannot be exchanged—now argued by a twenty-two-year-old to her own family. Her companion in the record is the slave Felicity, who gave birth in the prison three days before the games; to the taunt of a jailer’s servant—if she complained in labour, what would she do before the beasts?—she answered, “I myself now suffer that which I suffer, but there another shall be in me who shall suffer for me, because I am to suffer for him” (*Passion* 15). A matron and a slave, dying together and remembered together: the African church’s founding documents already contain, in narrative form, the theology of martyrdom—Christ suffering in the martyr—that Tertullian would argue in the treatises. The editor’s preface, moreover, defends the recording of recent visions on principle, in the voice of those “by whom both the prophecies and the new visions promised are received and honored” (*Passion* 1)—language that welcomes exactly the “new prophecy” currents then dividing the churches of Asia, and shows how broadly those currents ran in Carthage before anyone thought them a party matter. Tertullian himself is the first author to cite the text, invoking “the most heroic martyr Perpetua” and her vision of Paradise (*On the Soul* 55).

Because the editor is unnamed, Carthaginian, and stylistically vigorous, modern scholars have sometimes guessed that Tertullian himself edited the *Passion*. The guess has no ancient support, rests on resemblance alone, and is widely doubted; this study reports it as a modern attribution and does not assert it. Likewise the *Passion*’s “Montanist” character is a debated label for a text that no ancient writer treats as sectarian.

2.4 A visible, taunting minority

The church Tertullian joined was therefore a community whose formative literature consisted of interrogation transcripts and prison visions. Its self-understanding was forged under intermittent local persecution: not an empire-wide policy, but the standing possibility that a governor would apply the precedent against Christians who were denounced to him. Tertullian would later taunt the magistrates with the movement’s growth—“we are but of yesterday, and we have filled every place among you—cities, islands, fortresses, towns, market-places, the very camp, tribes, companies, palace, senate, forum,—we have left nothing to you but the temples of your gods” (*Apology* 37)—and warn a persecuting proconsul about “so many thousands, of such a multitude of men and women, persons of every sex and every age and every rank” in Carthage alone (*To Scapula* 5). These are an advocate’s totals, rhetorical rather than statistical; but they witness a community large enough to be visible, organized enough to be envied, and confident enough to argue with Rome in Rome’s own legal idiom. The other side of visibility was scapegoating, and he fixed it in the most quoted sentence ever written about pagan-Christian relations: “If the Tiber rises as high as the city walls, if the Nile

does not send its waters up over the fields, if the heavens give no rain, if there is an earthquake, if there is famine or pestilence, straightway the cry is, ‘Away with the Christians to the lion!’—to which the advocate appends the dry query, “What! shall you give such multitudes to a single beast?” (*Apology* 40). That idiom, and that confidence, are Tertullian’s signature.

3 The Evidence for a Life

3.1 What Tertullian says, and does not say, about himself

The manuscripts of his works transmit the full name Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus. Only once does the author name himself: the treatise *On the Veiling of Virgins* closes with a third-person subscription wishing peace to willing readers “as likewise to Septimius Tertullianus, whose this tractate is” (*On the Veiling of Virgins* 17). Everything else must be inferred from some thirty-one surviving Latin treatises, none of them autobiographical.

The inferences are nonetheless substantial. He wrote a supple, aggressive, learned Latin saturated with the techniques of the rhetorical schools, and he handled philosophical, medical, legal, and antiquarian material with the ease of an expensively educated man. He knew Greek well enough to compose in it: “this point has already received a fuller discussion from us in Greek,” he remarks of a baptismal question (*On Baptism* 15)—one of several notices of Greek works, all now lost. He was married; the two books *To His Wife* address her directly and ask that “after our departure,” she “renounce nuptials” (*To His Wife* 1.1). He was a convert who remembered being otherwise: he exhorts “that repentance, O sinner, like myself,” be embraced “as a shipwrecked man the protection of some plank” (*On Repentance* 4), and his works assume intimate former acquaintance with the games, the theatre, and pagan civic religion. In the *Apology* he makes the admission a rhetorical weapon and, in passing, a theology of conversion: “Once these things were with us, too, the theme of ridicule. We are of your stock and nature: men are made, not born, Christians” (*Apology* 18)—*fiunt, non nascuntur Christiani*, a tag with a long future. Most strikingly, he twice speaks of himself as one of the laity. Arguing that in extremity every Christian may baptize and offer, he asks, “Are not even we laics priests? . . . where three are, a church is, albeit they be laics” (*On Exhortation to Chastity* 7); and in *On Monogamy* he mocks how “we,” the laity, exalt ourselves against the clergy when it suits us (*On Monogamy* 12).

One curious little work is as close as he comes to a public self-portrait. In *On the Pallium* he defends, before his fellow citizens, his own exchange of the Roman toga for the pallium, the rough mantle of philosophers—a change of dress that any Carthaginian would read as a change of allegiance. The treatise never says the word “Christian” until its last line, and then turns the whole performance over with a flourish: “Joy, Mantle, and exult! A better philosophy has now deigned to honour you, ever since you have begun to be a Christian’s vesture!” (*On the Pallium* 6). Whatever else is uncertain about the man, this is how he wished to be seen: a public intellectual whose conversion was itself an argument, worn in the street.

3.2 The received portrait: Jerome and Eusebius

The earliest connected biography is a paragraph written about 392–393. Jerome of Stridon, in his catalogue *On Illustrious Men*, makes Tertullian “the presbyter, now regarded as chief of the Latin writers,” a Carthaginian, “the son of a proconsul or centurion, a man of keen and vigorous character”; he flourished under Severus and Caracalla; he “was presbyter of the church until middle life, afterwards driven by the envy and abuse of the clergy of the Roman church, he lapsed to the doctrine of Montanus”; in old age he wrote many works now lost, and “he is said to have lived to a decrepit old age” (*On Illustrious Men* 53). Jerome also preserves the most famous item of ancient reception: an old man of Concordia who had known Cyprian’s secretary told him that Cyprian read Tertullian daily and would ask for the book with the words “Give me the master” (*Da magistrum*) (ibid.).

Almost a century before Jerome, Eusebius of Caesarea had cited the *Apology*—which he knew in a Greek translation—and introduced its author as “a man well versed in the laws of the Romans, and in other respects of high repute, and one of those especially distinguished in Rome” (*Church History* 2.2.4; cf. 5.5, where Tertullian is “a trustworthy witness”). Eusebius thus places Tertullian, at least by reputation, in a Roman and legal milieu.

3.3 The modern audit of the portrait

Twentieth-century scholarship subjected this portrait to a severe audit, most influentially Timothy Barnes's *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (1971). Barnes argued that nearly every biographical detail not found in Tertullian's own works dissolves on inspection: "Tertullian's father was not a centurion; there never was a *centurio proconsularis*"—the office rests on a corrupted text of Jerome; the presbyterate contradicts Tertullian's own lay self-description; the identification of the Christian writer with the jurist Tertullianus excerpted in the *Digest* is unfounded; Eusebius's Roman legal expert is an inference from the *Apology*'s forensic manner; and the tale that envy of the Roman clergy drove him to Montanism explains nothing in the African evidence. On Barnes's minimal reconstruction—in the summary of his reviewer Frend, that Tertullian "was born a member of the Carthaginian literary class"—the writer was a lay, married, classically educated Carthaginian who wrote intensively between about 196 and 212 and died not long afterwards. On that compressed chronology the whole career shrinks to a middle-aged flare: born about 170, writing furiously from his later twenties, dead—"perhaps a little more than forty"—soon after the pen stops. Reviewers accepted much of the demolition while doubting the compression: W. H. C. Frend, among others, held that Jerome "is unlikely to have been completely mistaken" on every point and that the traditional longer life—birth around 155–160, death, on Jerome's report of great old age, perhaps as late as the 220s—could not be excluded (Frend 1974). No consensus has replaced the ranges: birth somewhere in c. 155–170, death after 212 at an unknown date.

Every element of the customary summary "born c. 155, son of a centurion, lawyer in Rome, priest of Carthage, died c. 220" is either a late report, a disputed reading, or a modern inference. This study therefore treats only the self-witness and the dated works as controlling, and reports the rest as tradition under review.

4 The Corpus: An Inventory of Thirty-One Treatises

4.1 What survives, and how it is dated

The man is thin in the sources; the shelf is not. Thirty-one Latin treatises are accepted as authentic and survive complete or nearly so—a body of work without parallel in Christian Latin before Cyprian, ranging from open letters to magistrates, through catechetical instructions on baptism, prayer, and penance, to five books against Marcion and the little masterpiece of invective on his own cloak.

Beside the survivors stands a documented shadow-corpus. The specialist census of lost works (this study follows the Tertullian Project's) runs to some fifteen Latin titles and three Greek ones, each known from a real witness: Tertullian's own cross-references ("this point has already received a fuller discussion from us in Greek," he says of a baptismal question, *On Baptism* 15; a separate treatise on the soul's origin, *De censu animae*, is noticed in *A Treatise on the Soul*); the table of contents of the ninth-century Codex Agobardinus, which still promises works like *On Paradise* and *On the Hope of the Faithful* that its surviving leaves no longer contain; and Jerome, whose list of the old man's writings—six books *On Ecstasy* with a seventh against Apollonius among them—names what the fourth century could still read and we cannot (*On Illustrious Men* 53). A further shelf of spurious pieces gathered under his name in the manuscripts; none is used in this study.

The corpus also documents its own workshop. The *Apology* and *To the Nations* run parallel for whole stretches—the same brief, revised for a different audience; the later chapters of *An Answer to the Jews* overlap the third book against Marcion so closely that critics still argue which text cannibalized which; and the preface of *Against Marcion* narrates outright the pirated second edition and the definitive third (*Against Marcion* 1.1). These are the habits of a working publicist: drafts reused, arguments recycled between fronts, editions superseded and yet surviving side by side. Much of the difficulty of dating the works is simply this habit seen from a distance—the corpus is not a row of finished monuments but a live archive, and it should be read as one.

Dating the survivors is the corpus's standing problem. Exactly four external or internal anchors exist: the twin apologies of 197 (from their civil-war allusions), the "fifteenth year of Severus" in *Against Marcion* 1.15 (207/208), the military donative behind *The Chaplet* 1 (linked to 211), and the Utica portent of *To Scapula* 3 (the eclipse of 14 August 212). Everything else floats. The specialist consensus is candid—in the words of the Tertullian Project's survey, all the works "must date between 190–220 AD, but there is no agreement among scholars about a definitive dating or sequence"—and this study therefore asserts no work-by-work chronology.

The customary handbooks nevertheless sort the corpus into three periods: “pre-Montanist,” “transitional,” and “Montanist.” The labels are useful and treacherous at once. They are useful because some works really do invoke the Paraclete and revile the *psychici* while others show no trace of either; treacherous because the sorting often rests on nothing firmer than tone, and because it presupposes the very “conversion to Montanism” event that, as later sections show, no source dates or describes. In the inventory below, the Period column therefore reports the customary label, downgraded to what this study could verify: “early” means customarily placed before the New Prophecy works and showing no New Prophecy signal at the loci read; “NP” means the work itself, at a locus cited in this study, aligns with the New Prophecy or attacks the *psychici*; “disputed” means the handbooks disagree and the text settles nothing.

4.2 The inventory

Every one of the thirty-one treatises was consulted for this study at the Ante-Nicene Fathers translation (the witnesses and access dates are recorded in the References and the research records); the final column gives the chapters actually cited in these pages.

Work	Date	Occasion	Period	Cited at
<i>Apology (Apologeticum)</i>	197 (K)	Forensic defense of the Christians, addressed to the “rulers of the Roman Empire”	early	2, 17, 18, 30, 37, 39, 40, 50
<i>To the Nations (Ad nationes)</i>	197 (K)	Rougher twin of the <i>Apology</i> , turned on the pagan public rather than the bench	early	1.1, 1.7, 1.8
<i>The Testimony of the Soul (De testimonio animae)</i>	—	Follow-up of <i>Apology</i> 17: the unschooled soul called as witness for God	early	1, 2, 5, 6
<i>To the Martyrs (Ad martyras)</i>	—	Exhortation to imprisoned confessors awaiting trial at Carthage	early	1, 2, 3
<i>To Scapula (Ad Scapulam)</i>	after 14 Aug 212 (A/K)	Open letter to the persecuting proconsul of Africa	late	2, 3, 4, 5
<i>An Answer to the Jews (Adversus Iudaeos)</i>	—	A day-long dispute “between a Christian and a Jewish proselyte,” resumed in writing	early; latter chapters’ state disputed	1, 7
<i>Prescription against Heretics</i>	—	Standing plea barring all heresies from arguing out of the churches’ Scriptures	early	7, 13, 36
<i>Against Marcion</i> (5 books)	207/208 (A)	Third edition of his longest polemic, against Marcion’s two gods and cut Scriptures	transitional	1.1, 1.15, 3.24, 4.2
<i>Against Hermogenes</i>	—	Against a Carthaginian painter teaching the eternity of matter	early	1, 2
<i>Against the Valentinians</i>	—	Satirical exposure of the Valentinian system, largely after Irenaeus	disputed	1, 3
<i>On the Flesh of Christ (De carne Christi)</i>	—	Against Marcion, Apelles, and Valentinus on the reality of Christ’s flesh	disputed	1, 5
<i>On the Resurrection of the Flesh</i>	—	Companion piece: the flesh itself rises; against spiritualizing exegesis	disputed	1, 8
<i>Against Praxeas</i>	—	Against the “monarchian” collapse of Father into Son; the Trinitarian vocabulary	NP (ch. 1)	1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 25, 27
<i>Scorpiace</i>	—	“Antidote” against gnostic denial that God wills martyrdom, written amid persecution’s “dog-star”	disputed	1
<i>A Treatise on the Soul (De anima)</i>	—	Christian psychology against the philosophers; the corporeal soul	NP (ch. 9)	9, 20, 55, 58

Work	Date	Occasion	Period	Cited at
<i>On Baptism (De baptismo)</i>	—	Against a female teacher denying baptism; the earliest surviving treatise on a sacrament	early	1, 4, 7, 8, 15, 17, 18
<i>On Prayer (De oratione)</i>	—	Catechetical exposition of the Lord's Prayer and rules of prayer	early	1, 25, 29
<i>On Repentance (De paenitentia)</i>	—	Catechesis on baptismal and second repentance; <i>exomologesis</i>	early	4, 7, 9
<i>Of Patience (De patientia)</i>	—	Moral homily by a self-confessed impatient man	early	1
<i>To His Wife (Ad uxorem, 2 books)</i>	—	Counsel to his wife on widowhood and remarriage; praise of Christian marriage	early	1.1, 2.8
<i>On the Apparel of Women (De cultu feminarum, 2 books)</i>	—	Against luxury of dress and ornament; “the devil's gateway” page	early	1.1, 2.13
<i>On Exhortation to Chastity</i>	—	To a widowed brother against remarriage; the “laics priests” argument	disputed	7
<i>On Monogamy (De monogamia)</i>	—	One marriage only; open war on the <i>psychici</i>	NP (ch. 1)	1, 12
<i>On the Veiling of Virgins</i>	—	All virgins, not only wives, to be veiled; rule of faith versus discipline	NP (ch. 1)	1, 17
<i>On Modesty (De pudicitia)</i>	—	Against the penitential edict readmitting adulterers; the keys and the Spirit-church	NP (ch. 1)	1, 21
<i>On Fasting, against the Psychics (Deieiunio)</i>	—	Defense of the New Prophecy's fasts against the “carnally-minded”	NP (ch. 1)	1
<i>The Shows (De spectaculis)</i>	—	Why the baptized must renounce games, theatre, and arena	early	4, 25, 30
<i>On Idolatry (De idololatria)</i>	—	Casuistry of trades, oaths, offices, and service in an idolatrous city	disputed	1, 14, 19
<i>The Chaplet (De corona)</i>	c. 211 (A/K)	A soldier's refusal of the military crown; the authority of unwritten custom	transitional	1, 3, 11
<i>On Flight in Persecution (De fuga in persecutione)</i>	—	To Fabius: whether Christians may flee persecution; answered no	NP (ch. 1)	1, 9, 14
<i>On the Pallium (De pallio)</i>	—	Apologia to Carthage for exchanging the toga for the philosopher's mantle	disputed	1, 6

The inventory's Occasion column condenses each work's own self-presentation at the chapters cited; the Period column is a convention under review, not a finding. Where “NP” appears, the signal is in the text at the locus given (the Paraclete invoked, the *psychici* attacked); where “early” appears, the claim is only that the loci read here show no such signal and the handbooks concur; “disputed” preserves real disagreement. No further precision exists to report.

5 The Convert as Advocate

5.1 The twin assault of 197

Tertullian's datable literary career opens with a burst of apologetic. The twin works *To the Nations* and the *Apology* are generally placed in 197 on the basis of their references to the civil wars that brought Septimius Severus—himself an African—to sole power; the dating is a scholarly reconstruction from internal allusions, not an ancient statement,

but it is broadly accepted. What is certain is their strategy. Instead of pleading for pity, Tertullian indicts the legal process itself: Christians are punished for a name, under a procedure that inverts every Roman norm, on charges—incest, infanticide, disloyalty—that no court ever bothers to prove. “The name is the cause,” he tells the pagan public: “some mysterious force intensified by your ignorance assails it” (*To the Nations* 1.1). Torture, used on others to compel confession, is used on Christians to compel denial. The argument is that of a trained forensic mind enjoying the absurdity of its opponents’ case.

The indictment has a documented legal history behind it, and Tertullian recites it like a brief. The only imperial guidance anyone could cite was Trajan’s rescript to Pliny, and he shreds it: Trajan ruled that “Christians were by no means to be sought after; but if they were brought before him, they should be punished.” Tertullian answers: “O miserable deliverance—under the necessities of the case, a self-contradiction! It forbids them to be sought after as innocent, and it commands them to be punished as guilty” (*Apology* 2). The precedent itself he traces to the worst possible authority: “Under Nero it was ruthlessly condemned,” he writes of the Christian name, “and you may weigh its worth and character even from the person of its persecutor” (*To the Nations* 1.7)—the earliest Latin statement of the claim that anti-Christian repression began as a Neronian measure. And against the sneer that the movement was foreign and marginal he sets a sociological taunt: “We are indeed said to be the third race of men” (*To the Nations* 1.8)—neither Roman nor Jew, and present everywhere.

5.2 The church described from inside

Within the indictment stands a portrait of the church from inside, the first in Latin. “We are a body knit together as such by a common religious profession, by unity of discipline, and by the bond of a common hope,” he writes; the community’s fund is “piety’s deposit fund,” spent not on banquets but “to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined now to the house,” and on the shipwrecked, and on those in the mines and prisons for the Name; and the pagans themselves testify, “See, they say, how they love one another” (*Apology* 39). Two of his sentences became permanent Christian property: the observation, against the persecutors, that “the oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed” (*Apology* 50), and the exclamation “O noble testimony of the soul by nature Christian!”—the soul that, startled, cries out to the one God it pretends not to know (*Apology* 17).

The portrait includes the first Latin theology of Christian citizenship. Christians will not swear by the emperor’s genius, but they pray for him to the only God who can help him: “For we offer prayer for the safety of our princes to the eternal, the true, the living God. . . with hands outstretched, because free from sin; with head uncovered, for we have nothing whereof to be ashamed; finally, without a monitor, because it is from the heart we supplicate,” asking “life prolonged; security to the empire; protection to the imperial house; brave armies, a faithful senate, a virtuous people, the world at rest” (*Apology* 30). Loyal prayer, disloyal incense: the distinction, drawn here with full rhetorical dress, became the standard Christian position on the pagan state and remained so until the state itself changed sides.

The *Apology* is also the first Latin Christian book with a traceable international readership: Eusebius cites it repeatedly through a Greek translation (*Church History* 2.2.4)—the direction of translation now reversed, Greek Christianity reading an African Latin.

5.3 The soul in the witness-box

The exclamation of *Apology* 17 grew into a separate treatise, the shortest and perhaps the most original of his apologetic works. *The Testimony of the Soul* summons a new witness to the stand, and disqualifies the educated versions first: “I call you not as when, fashioned in schools, trained in libraries, fed in Attic academies and porticoes, you belch wisdom. I address you simple, rude, uncultured and untaught”—“Stand forth, O soul” (*The Testimony of the Soul* 1). The evidence is ordinary speech: the pagan who spontaneously says “God is good,” “God sees,” “God will judge between us,” testifies against his own mythology every time he opens his mouth (*The Testimony of the Soul* 2). The argument closes with a lawyer’s flourish on the witness’s competence: “These testimonies of the soul are simple as true, commonplace as simple, universal as commonplace, natural as universal, divine as natural” (*The Testimony of the Soul* 5)—and the competence is universal jurisdiction: “There is one soul and many tongues. . . all the world over is found the witness of the soul” (*The Testimony of the Soul* 6). It is natural theology conducted as cross-examination, and nothing quite like it exists before him in any language.

5.4 To the prisoners

The advocate also wrote for the accused themselves. *To the Martyrs*, a short exhortation to confessors lying in the Carthage prison, opens with the church's practical machinery visible in a single sentence: "Blessed Martyrs Designate—Along with the provision which our lady mother the Church from her bountiful breasts, and each brother out of his private means, makes for your bodily wants in the prison, accept also from me some contribution to your spiritual sustenance" (*To the Martyrs* 1). The consolations are characteristically bracing rather than tender—"The prison does the same service for the Christian which the desert did for the prophet" (*To the Martyrs* 2)—and the governing image is enlistment: "we were called to the warfare of the living God in our very response to the sacramental words" (*To the Martyrs* 3), the baptismal oath read as a soldier's oath, with prison for barracks and the arena for the field. Whether the treatise belongs to the persecution of 197 or of 202–203 is not stated in the text and is not decided here; the world it documents—church funds flowing into prisons, private brothers supplementing them, martyrs treated as a designated class—needed no particular year.

5.5 The argument with the synagogue

One further front completes the early apologetic map. *An Answer to the Jews* presents itself as the written resumption of a live debate: "It happened very recently a dispute was held between a Christian and a Jewish proselyte. Alternately with contentious cable they each spun out the day until evening" (*An Answer to the Jews* 1). The treatise then argues from the prophets that the Messiah has come, and at its centre stands a survey of the Gospel's spread that has been quoted ever since for the geography of early Christianity: among those who have believed are "the varied races of the Gætulians, and manifold confines of the Moors, all the limits of the Spains, and the diverse nations of the Gauls, and the haunts of the Britons—inaccessible to the Romans, but subjugated to Christ" (*An Answer to the Jews* 7). The list is advocacy, not a census—Britain is there for the rhetorical reach—but it shows what an African Christian around 200 believed his movement to be: universal, and visibly so. The treatise's later chapters overlap the third book against Marcion so closely that their textual state is an old critical problem; this study cites only the opening and the survey, which are not in dispute.

5.6 The last dated word

Fifteen years after the twin apologies the advocate returned to the same brief in miniature. *To Scapula*, an open letter to the proconsul Scapula who had resumed executions, is datable with unusual precision: it mentions a portentous darkening of the sun "in the metropolis of Utica" (*To Scapula* 3), commonly identified with the eclipse visible in Africa on 14 August 212. The letter is also the best corrective to any picture of uniform persecution, for its argument is precedent, and the precedents are officials who declined to persecute. "Even Severus himself, the father of Antonine, was graciously mindful of the Christians," Tertullian reminds Scapula: the emperor sought out the Christian Proculus and "kept him in his palace till the day of his death," and "both women and men of highest rank, whom Severus knew well to be Christians, were not merely permitted by him to remain uninjured; but he even bore distinguished testimony in their favour." Among Scapula's own predecessors, Cincius Severus "pointed out how the Christians should answer that they might secure an acquittal," Vespronius Candidus dismissed a Christian to keep the peace, and Pudens tore up a vexatious indictment (*To Scapula* 4). The persecution Tertullian knew was real and lethal, but occasional, local, and dependent on the temper of the man on the tribunal—which is exactly why one letter to one proconsul was worth writing. The letter contains the most remarkable sentence of early Christian political thought: "it is a fundamental human right, a privilege of nature, that every man should worship according to his own convictions" (*To Scapula* 2). The claim is not modern religious liberalism—Tertullian is arguing that coerced worship is worthless to any god—but no earlier writer is known to have stated the principle so baldly, and it is regularly invoked in modern discussions of religious freedom. After *To Scapula*, nothing Tertullian wrote can be securely dated; the advocate's last dated word is a threat wrapped in a plea for his persecutors' own good.

6 A Working Church: Baptism, Prayer, Penance, Marriage

Because Tertullian wrote for catechumens, spouses, and penitents as well as against enemies, his corpus is an unmatched window on what a Latin church around the year 200 actually did. The evidence must be read as advocacy—he is always urging a practice, rarely just describing one—but the practices themselves are not invented.

6.1 The font

On Baptism, the earliest surviving treatise on any sacrament, defends the humble efficacy of water against a female teacher who denied it. “We, little fishes, after the example of our *Ichthys* Jesus Christ, are born in water,” he begins—the Greek acrostic “fish” standing for Christ—“nor have we safety in any other way than by permanently abiding in water” (*On Baptism* 1). The treatise walks through a developed rite. The water itself is no mere symbol: invoked over, it is changed, for “the nature of the waters, sanctified by the Holy One, itself conceived withal the power of sanctifying” (*On Baptism* 4). Then the sequence that every later Western ritual would elaborate: “After this, when we have issued from the font, we are thoroughly anointed with a blessed unction” (*On Baptism* 7), and “the hand is laid on us, invoking and inviting the Holy Spirit through benediction” (*On Baptism* 8)—washing, anointing, imposition of hands, each already distinct, each already interpreted. The same treatise preserves, in passing, an episode of church discipline elsewhere: the presbyter in Asia who composed the apocryphal *Acts of Paul*, “after being convicted, and confessing that he had done it from love of Paul, was removed from his office” (*On Baptism* 17), an early datum for how the church policed writings about the apostles.

One counsel in the treatise startles the modern reader and is precious evidence precisely for that reason: Tertullian argues that “the delay of baptism is preferable; principally, however, in the case of little children. . . . Let them become Christians when they have become able to know Christ” (*On Baptism* 18). The passage presupposes that infants were in fact being brought to the font—otherwise there would be nothing to delay—and simultaneously shows that the practice was still arguable; his motive is not doubt about the sacrament but terror of sin after it, the same once-only seriousness that governs his penitential teaching. Both halves of the datum, the practice and the protest, belong to the history of infant baptism.

6.2 The school of prayer

On Prayer expounds the Our Father for catechumens, clause by clause, and opens with the characterization the Catholic Church still quotes: the Lord, he says, “has determined for us, the disciples of the New Testament, a new form of prayer,” and “in the Prayer is comprised an epitome of the whole Gospel” (*On Prayer* 1). The treatise then descends into the congregation’s actual habits—postures, the kiss of peace, disputes about sitting on couches and washing hands—small windows onto a worship already thick with custom, including the earliest Latin notice of the fixed hours of daily prayer: beyond morning and evening, “those common hours, I mean, which mark the intervals of the day—the third, the sixth, the ninth—which we may find in the Scriptures to have been more solemn than the rest” (*On Prayer* 25)—the seed of what the later church would organize as the daily office. It closes on the note that makes it a devotional classic rather than a rubric-book: “Prayer is alone that which vanquishes God” (*On Prayer* 29)—prayer as the one force to which, by his own covenant, the Almighty consents to yield.

6.3 The second plank

On Repentance shows the second-century penitential system mid-development. Baptism is the great forgiveness; for grave sin afterwards, God “in the vestibule has stationed the second repentance for opening to such as knock: but now once for all, because now for the second time; but never more” (*On Repentance* 7). That second chance takes bodily form in *exomologesis*, the public discipline in which the sinner is commanded “to lie in sackcloth and ashes, to cover his body in mourning,” and “to bow before the feet of the presbyters” (*On Repentance* 9). The whole later history of the sacrament of penance—and Tertullian’s own later fury at its relaxation—starts from this once-only public rigor.

6.4 Custom with the force of law

The Chaplet preserves the classic early list of practices held on custom and tradition rather than on a scriptural text: the solemn renunciation of “the devil, and his pomp, and his angels” before baptism; the threefold immersion (“Hereupon we are thrice immersed, making a somewhat ampler pledge than the Lord has appointed in the Gospel”); the taste of milk and honey for the newly baptized; the eucharistic assembly itself—“we take also, in congregations before daybreak, and from the hand of none but the presidents, the sacrament of the Eucharist, which the Lord both commanded to be eaten at meal-times, and enjoined to be taken by all alike”—with its pre-dawn hour and its rule that only the presiding clergy distribute; and two habits of enormous later history—“we make offerings for the dead as birthday honours,” that is, the Eucharist offered on the anniversary of a death, and the constant signing of the

cross: “At every forward step and movement, at every going in and out. . . in all the ordinary actions of daily life, we trace upon the forehead the sign” (*The Chaplet* 3). Tertullian cites these precisely because they are unwritten, arguing that observed tradition can bind; the passage remains a locus classicus in Catholic accounts of tradition.

6.5 The household

The household had its theology too. The second book *To His Wife* closes with the most quoted early Christian praise of marriage: “What kind of yoke is that of two believers, (partakers) of one hope, one desire, one discipline, one and the same service? . . . truly two in one flesh. Where the flesh is one, one is the spirit too”; they pray and fast together, and “When Christ sees and hears, He joys” (*To His Wife* 2.8). The same pen that could scorch could also bless; the blessing, characteristically, is for a marriage inside the discipline of the church, contracted before it and confirmed by its oblation. Even the ferocious books on women’s dress end not in prohibition but in a transposed finery: “Clothe yourselves with the silk of uprightness, the fine linen of holiness, the purple of modesty. Thus painted, you will have God as your Lover!” (*On the Apparel of Women* 2.13).

6.6 The Christian in a pagan city

Between font and household lay the city, and the city was wired with religion. *On Idolatry* is Tertullian’s casuistry manual for living in it, built on a maximal definition of the danger: “The principal crime of the human race, the highest guilt charged upon the world, the whole procuring cause of judgment, is idolatry” (*On Idolatry* 1). From that premise he works through the trades one by one—makers of idols, teachers of pagan letters, astrologers, incense-sellers, holders of civic office—asking of each whether it can be practiced without serving the gods. He is no separatist in principle: Scripture, he concedes, does not forbid ordinary commerce and company with pagans, “Otherwise you would go out from the world” (*On Idolatry* 14, citing Paul). But where the line falls, it falls absolutely. On military service his ruling became famous: soldiers had come to John the Baptist, a centurion had believed, “still the Lord afterward, in disarming Peter,” unbelted—so the standard rendering—every soldier thereafter (*On Idolatry* 19). He pressed the same conclusion when a Christian soldier’s refusal to wear the military crown scandalized his fellow believers: “shall it be held lawful to make an occupation of the sword, when the Lord proclaims that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword? And shall the son of peace take part in the battle when it does not become him even to sue at law?” (*The Chaplet* 11). Later Christian centuries would decide the question differently; the sentences remain the sharpest ancient statement of the rigorist side. *The Shows* applies the same total logic to the games and the theatre, and its legal ground is the baptismal contract itself: “When entering the water, we make profession of the Christian faith in the words of its rule; we bear public testimony that we have renounced the devil, his pomp, and his angels”—and the shows, being idolatry’s pageantry, are precisely that renounced pomp (*The Shows* 4). The conclusion is drawn with characteristic relish: “How monstrous it is to go from God’s church to the devil’s—from the sky to the sty, as they say; to raise your hands to God, and then to weary them in the applause of an actor” (*The Shows* 25). Whether all this describes what average Carthaginian Christians did, or what Tertullian could not make them do, the treatises themselves confess: he legislates because they attended, traded, served, and wore what he condemned.

7 Drawing the Boundary: Prescription and Polemic

7.1 The master-stroke

The same forensic instinct that indicted the persecutors organized Tertullian’s war on heresy. His master-stroke, the *Prescription Against Heretics*, transfers to theology the Roman litigator’s *praescriptio*—a plea that defeats an opponent’s case before its merits are argued. Heretics appeal to Scripture; Tertullian answers that the Scriptures are the property of the churches that received them from the apostles, so that outsiders have no standing to argue from them at all. The rule of faith, publicly taught in the apostolic churches, settles in advance what the documents mean.

What the rule of faith contained, he obligingly wrote out, and the text is among the most important creedal witnesses of the second century: belief “that there is one only God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word”; that this Word, “called His Son,” spoke through the patriarchs and prophets, was “at last brought down by the Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was

made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ”; that he “preached the new law and the new promise of the kingdom of heaven, worked miracles; having been crucified, He rose again the third day; (then) having ascended into the heavens, He sat at the right hand of the Father; sent instead of Himself the Power of the Holy Ghost to lead such as believe”; and that he “will come with glory” to judge both classes of mankind “after the resurrection of both these classes shall have happened, together with the restoration of their flesh” (*Prescription* 13). Every article of the later Western creeds is recognizably present, a century and more before their conciliar fixing; the sequence is not yet a liturgical formula, but it is already the standard against which he measures every teacher.

The witness of the apostolic sees anchors the rule. Anyone who doubts where the teaching churches are may “run over the apostolic churches, in which the very thrones of the apostles are still pre-eminent in their places”—Corinth, Philippi, Ephesus; and for an African, Rome is nearest: “How happy is its church, on which apostles poured forth all their doctrine along with their blood! where Peter endures a passion like his Lord’s! where Paul wins his crown in a death like John’s” (*Prescription* 36)—an early and independent Latin witness to the Roman deaths of Peter and Paul. The treatise also fixed his most famous antithesis: “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church?” (*Prescription* 7). The sentence is a standing temptation to misquotation: its author was soaked in the philosophy he here forswears, used Stoic materials throughout his theology, and elsewhere calls the philosophers to witness. It is a rule against mixing authorities, not a ban on thought.

7.2 The named opponents

The prescription in hand, Tertullian still argued the merits, at enormous length, against named opponents, and the surviving polemics show his full range of weapons. Against Hermogenes, a Carthaginian painter who taught that God created the world out of eternally existing matter, he opens with pure personal demolition—a man who “mistakes loquacity for eloquence, and supposes impudence to be firmness,” and whose doctrine is Stoicism baptized: “he will not have it that He made all things of nothing,” for “he learned there from the Stoics how to place Matter (on the same level) with the Lord, just as if it too had existed ever both unborn and unmade” (*Against Hermogenes* 1–2). The issue beneath the abuse is creation from nothing, and Tertullian’s insistence on it—God alone eternal, everything else made—became the Latin default. Against the Valentinian schools he chose ridicule as method. Their system hides itself, he says, like “Eleusinian dissipations of their own, consecrated by a profound silence, having nothing of the heavenly in them but their mystery”; his answer is exposure, for “even merely to point out that which is concealed with so great an outlay of artifice, is to destroy it” (*Against the Valentinians* 1, 3). And when gnostic teachers, in a season of persecution he calls the “dog-star,” argued that a good God could not want his people killed and that confession before magistrates was unnecessary, he wrote *Scorpiace*—the “antidote”—“in opposition to the little beasts which trouble our sect,” defending martyrdom itself as commanded, honorable, and owed (*Scorpiace* 1). He lets the objection speak in its own voice before crushing it: “If He kills me, how will it be His duty to preserve me? Once for all Christ died for us. . . . If He demands the like from me in return, does He also look for salvation from my death by violence?” (*Scorpiace* 1)—the eternal argument of theology against martyrdom, recorded here by its fiercest ancient enemy. The man who demanded that Christians not flee the persecutor could at least claim consistency: no opponent was to escape the arena, and neither was he.

7.3 Marcion, and the corpus’s one absolute date

Above all stood Marcion of Pontus, whose severed god of pure goodness and mutilated Scriptures Tertullian pursued through five books. *Against Marcion* is his longest work and also the anchor of his chronology. Its preface confesses a publishing history: a hurried first edition, then a fuller one lost “by the fraud of a person who was then a brother, but became afterwards an apostate,” who circulated a faulty copy, and now a third, definitive edition (*Against Marcion* 1.1). And in its first book he dates Marcion’s novelty “to the fifteenth of the Emperor Severus” (*Against Marcion* 1.15)—the fifteenth year of Septimius Severus, 207/208, the one absolute date Tertullian ever gives for his own time of writing. The work is a landmark of canon history as well as polemic. Book four opens with the four written Gospels ranked by authorship—“Of the apostles, therefore, John and Matthew first instil faith into us; whilst of apostolic men, Luke and Mark renew it afterwards”—and identifies the opponent’s scripture: “Now, of the authors whom we possess, Marcion seems to have singled out Luke for his mutilating process” (*Against Marcion* 4.2). A fourfold Gospel, named authors, and a heretic convicted of cutting the text: the argumentative machinery of all later Catholic canon polemic is already assembled here, in Latin, within living memory of Irenaeus’s parallel Greek case.

Marcion, Hermogenes, Praxeas, and the Valentinians survive almost entirely in the words of their enemies. Tertullian's reports are controlled polemic: modern scholarship uses them cautiously and does not treat his reconstruction of any opponent as neutral description. This study cites them for Tertullian's side of the argument only.

For Latin Christianity the consequences were permanent. The prescription argument—Scripture read within the apostolic churches under the rule of faith—became a standing instrument of Catholic controversy long after its author's own standing had become an embarrassment to those who used it.

8 Coining the Latin of God: Trinity, Christ, Church, Flesh

Tertullian's largest single legacy is doctrinal language. Latin Christianity needed words for what Greek theology was still struggling to say, and Tertullian, a century and a quarter before Nicaea, minted much of the durable stock. This section takes the theology by department; the next weighs the "father of Latin theology" title itself.

8.1 The Trinitarian grammar of *Against Praxeas*

The occasion was a Roman quarrel. A certain Praxeas—otherwise unknown, and possibly a nickname—taught that the Father himself became incarnate and suffered, collapsing Father and Son into a single actor. The same man, says Tertullian, had earlier persuaded a bishop of Rome to withdraw letters recognizing the new prophecy in Asia; thus "Praxeas did a twofold service for the devil at Rome: he drove away prophecy, and he brought in heresy; he put to flight the Paraclete, and he crucified the Father" (*Against Praxeas* 1).

The reply sets out, in order, the vocabulary that stuck. First the frame: the one God exists under "the mystery of the dispensation. . . which distributes the Unity into a Trinity, placing in their order the three Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost" (*Against Praxeas* 2; the Latin behind the rendering runs *quae unitatem in trinitatem disponit*). Then the balance of threeness and oneness: "three, however, not in condition, but in degree; not in substance, but in form; not in power, but in aspect; yet of one substance, and of one condition, and of one power" (*Against Praxeas* 2; *tres autem non statu sed gradu, nec substantia sed forma, nec potestate sed specie, unius autem substantiae et unius status et unius potestatis*). Here for the first time in surviving Christian literature the word *trinitas* does systematic work, together with *substantia* for the one Godhead and *persona* for the three.

He knew exactly how novel the grammar sounded in the pews. "The simple, indeed, (I will not call them unwise and unlearned,) who always constitute the majority of believers, are startled at the dispensation of the Three in One" (*Against Praxeas* 3): they fear that distinguishing the Persons divides the one God whose "Monarchy" they defend, and Praxeas's collapse of Father into Son flattered precisely that honest fear. The treatise is therefore pastoral as well as polemical—an extended demonstration that counting to three in God is not polytheism—and its author's confidence that ordinary monotheistic instinct could be argued into Trinitarian shape set the tone for every Latin catechism after him.

Beneath the formulas lies a doctrine of God's eternal inner life that the treatise works out from the divine attribute of reason. Before creation, "even not then was He alone; for He had with Him that which He possessed in Himself, that is to say, His own Reason"—for "God is rational, and Reason was first in Him; and so all things were from Himself" (*Against Praxeas* 5). The Word the Greeks call *logos* is thus never an afterthought: God has never been wordless, and the generation of the Son for creation unfolds what was eternally within. It is not yet the Nicene co-eternal Son, but it is the argument-shape—God's Word grounded in God's rationality—through which Latin theology would eventually get there.

The treatise's images made the grammar teachable. "The root puts forth the tree, and the fountain the river, and the sun the ray," and just so "the Trinity, flowing down from the Father through intertwined and connected steps, does not at all disturb the Monarchy" (*Against Praxeas* 8): distinction without division, derivation without loss. Exegetically he fixed the anti-modalist reading of John: "I and my Father are one" means "one essence, not one Person"—"unity of substance, not singularity of number" (*Against Praxeas* 25). And the price of his pre-Nicene moment is equally visible on the page: "the Father is the entire substance, but the Son is a derivation and portion of the whole" (*Against Praxeas* 9)—a gradated, economic Trinity that the fourth century would have to correct even while keeping his words.

8.2 Christology: one person, two substances

The same treatise anticipates Chalcedon by two and a half centuries on the person of Christ: “we see plainly the twofold state, which is not confounded, but conjoined in One Person—Jesus, God and Man,” each substance preserving its own properties (*Against Praxeas* 27; *videmus duplicem statum, non confusum sed coniunctum, in una persona deum et hominem Iesum*). The formula grew out of an earlier fight. *On the Flesh of Christ* defends the full, unglamorous reality of Christ’s human birth against the docetic refinements of “Marcion, Apelles, and Valentinus,” and contains the most misquoted sentences he ever wrote: “The Son of God was crucified; I am not ashamed, because men must needs be ashamed of it. And the Son of God died; it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd. And He was buried, and rose again; the fact is certain, because it is impossible” (*On the Flesh of Christ* 5). The Latin (*prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est. . . certum est, quia impossibile*) says “it is credible, because it is unfitting. . . certain, because impossible”—a rhetorician’s paradox about the criterion of embarrassment, arguing that no one would invent so shameful a story. The slogan “credo quia absurdum,” “I believe because it is absurd,” appears nowhere in his works; the real sentence is an argument, not a surrender of reason, and this study quotes only what he wrote.

8.3 The theology of the sacraments

Tertullian is the earliest Latin writer we possess who puts the word *sacramentum*—in Roman usage a soldier’s oath and a sacred pledge—to sustained Christian work, and his sacramental instinct is physical through and through. The water of baptism is not a metaphor but a medium the Spirit has made potent (“the nature of the waters, sanctified by the Holy One, itself conceived withal the power of sanctifying,” *On Baptism* 4); the baptismal response is a military oath (“we were called to the warfare of the living God in our very response to the sacramental words,” *To the Martyrs* 3); and the whole economy of salvation runs through bodies in his summary of Christian initiation: “The flesh, indeed, is washed, in order that the soul may be cleansed; the flesh is anointed, that the soul may be consecrated; the flesh is signed (with the cross), that the soul too may be fortified; the flesh is shadowed with the imposition of hands, that the soul also may be illuminated by the Spirit; the flesh feeds on the body and blood of Christ, that the soul likewise may fatten on its God” (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 8). No ancient writer tied Christianity more tightly to matter: water, oil, milk, bread, blood, flesh. The theologian of the world’s contempt was, doctrinally, the great anti-spiritualizer.

8.4 The church and the keys

His ecclesiology moved with his rigorism, and both of its poles proved influential. The earlier Tertullian is the theologian of the apostolic churches, their rule of faith, and their exclusive title to Scripture—the *Prescription*’s picture, in which Rome’s blood-bought authority is celebrated. Already inside that churchly picture, however, sat his lay maximalism: the argument that in the absence of clergy “even we laics” are priests, and that “where three are, a church is, albeit they be laics” (*On Exhortation to Chastity* 7), holds the ordained hierarchy to be a matter of church order rather than of essence. The step from “three laymen are a church” to “the church is the Spirit, not the bishops” is shorter than it looks, and Tertullian took it under pressure. The later Tertullian, resisting the readmission of adulterers to communion, produced the first extended Latin argument about the power of the keys. Against the bishop’s claim to forgive grave sin he concedes the grant to Peter but refuses its transfer: “‘On thee,’ He says, ‘will I build My Church’; and, ‘I will give to thee the keys,’ not to the Church” (*On Modesty* 21). And the church that truly forgives is, on his last account, not an institution at all: “the Church itself is, properly and principally, the Spirit Himself. . . not the Church which consists of a number of bishops” (*On Modesty* 21). The passage is doubly historic: it is among the earliest witnesses to Matthew 16 being invoked for episcopal penitential authority—someone was claiming the keys, or Tertullian would not need to argue—and it is the fountainhead of every later spiritualist ecclesiology that sets the church of the Spirit against the church of office. Catholic theology kept his earlier argument and rejected his later one; both are his.

8.5 Last things: the soul in waiting, the flesh in hope

His eschatology completes the materialist pattern. In *A Treatise on the Soul* he argued that the soul is real precisely because, in his Stoic physics, it is corporeal in its own fashion—a position Augustine would later single out for correction, while pillaging the treatise for everything else. Between death and resurrection the soul does not sleep:

“All souls, therefore, are shut up within Hades. . . there are already experienced there punishments and consolations,” and the soul, he argues from the Gospel’s debtors’ prison, “undergoes in Hades some compensatory discipline, without prejudice to the full process of the resurrection” (*A Treatise on the Soul* 58)—an interim state with purgative colour that later Latin doctrine would develop on its own terms. The end itself he awaited concretely: “we do confess that a kingdom is promised to us upon the earth. . . after the resurrection for a thousand years in the divinely-built city of Jerusalem, ‘let down from heaven’” (*Against Marcion* 3.24)—the millenarian hope common among second-century writers and quietly abandoned by the later church. And the resurrection of the flesh was for him the creed’s centre of gravity: “The resurrection of the dead is the Christian’s trust. By it we are believers” (*On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 1).

Anticipation is not identity. Tertullian’s terms were forged in a pre-conciliar semantic world: his “substance” carries Stoic overtones of body, his Son proceeds from the Father for creation and is called a “portion,” his interim state and millennial kingdom are not later Catholic doctrine, and fourth-century standards of co-eternity should not be read back into him. The Church later received his vocabulary while correcting parts of his conceptual scaffolding. The claim made in this section is lexical and structural, not that Tertullian taught Nicene and Chalcedonian doctrine *avant la lettre*.

9 The Case for the Father of Latin Theology

“Father of Latin theology” is a received title, not an ancient one. This section weighs it as a historical claim: what Latin Christianity existed before him, what he actually coined, what he owed to the Greeks, and where the title’s honest limits lie.

9.1 What was there before him

Latin-speaking Christianity did not begin with Tertullian. The Scillitan martyrs of 180 answered a Latin interrogation and carried “books and epistles of Paul” in their case (*Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*); Tertullian’s own biblical quotations presuppose existing Latin renderings of Scripture circulating in Africa—he is, in Chapman’s phrase, “the first witness to the existence of a Latin Bible,” witness, not maker. What did not exist, so far as any surviving text shows, was Latin theology: argument, in Latin, about God, Christ, church, and sacrament, conducted at full intellectual pressure. The one possible rival is the elegant dialogue *Octavius* of Minucius Felix, another African; whether it precedes or follows the *Apology* is a genuinely unresolved scholarly question, and this study does not adjudicate it. But the *Octavius* is a philosophical apology that barely names Christian doctrine; even granting it priority, the theological corpus in Latin begins with Tertullian.

9.2 The coinages

The hard core of the title is lexical, and the specimens are on his pages at verified loci. *Trinitas* as the name of the three-personed God does its first surviving systematic work in *Against Praxeas* 2–3 (*quae unitatem in trinitatem disponit*); *substantia* and *persona*, put asymmetrically to God’s oneness and threeness in the same chapter (*tres. . . unius autem substantiae*), became and remain the Latin dogmatic pair; *una persona* with *duplex status* for Christ (*Against Praxeas* 27) gave the West its Christological syntax; *sacramentum* was bent from the soldier’s oath to the church’s mysteries. Around the technical stock stand the coined sentences that Latin Christianity never stopped repeating: *semen est sanguis Christianorum* (“the blood of Christians is seed,” *Apology* 50); *o testimonium animae naturaliter Christianae* (“O noble testimony of the soul by nature Christian!”, *Apology* 17); *caro salutis est cardo* (“the flesh is the hinge of salvation,” *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 8); *certum est, quia impossibile* (*On the Flesh of Christ* 5). Philologists have counted his neologisms in the hundreds; the counts vary with the criteria and none was verified for this study, so the claim is left qualitative: Chapman’s older caution—“to some extent, how great we cannot tell, he must have invented a theological idiom and have coined new expressions”—remains the honest form of it.

9.3 The debt to the Greeks

None of this was creation from nothing. Tertullian read Greek, wrote Greek works now lost, and worked with the Greek theology of his century all over his desk. Theophilus of Antioch, a generation before him, had already called God, his Word, and his Wisdom a “Trinity” in Greek—*trias*: “the three days which were before the luminaries, are types of the Trinity, of God, and His Word, and His wisdom” (*To Autolycus* 2.15). Justin and the apologists had built the case from the soul and from prophecy; Irenaeus had built the argument from apostolic succession that underlies the *Prescription*—Chapman again: “the whole luminous argument is founded on the first chapters of St. Irenæus’s third book.” Nor was the pagan inheritance disowned in practice, whatever *Prescription* 7 thundered: in his psychology he can cite the Stoic moralist warmly and possessively—“Just as Seneca says, whom we so often find on our side” (*A Treatise on the Soul* 20)—and his doctrines of soul and substance are worked in Stoic materials throughout. What Tertullian did was not to invent these arguments but to re-found them in another language’s categories: where Greek theology reached for philosophical abstraction, he reached for the law-court and the army camp—person, substance, prescription, oath. The choice of metaphors was itself a theology, and it is the one the Latin West inherited.

9.4 A style that taught Latin to argue about God

The vocabulary travelled because the sentences carried it. Tertullian’s Latin is compressed, antithetical, and built for quotation: the paradox sequence of *On the Flesh of Christ* 5, the balanced taunt of *On Monogamy* 1 (“Heretics do away with marriages; Psychics accumulate them”), the courtroom snap of *Apology* 2’s “O miserable deliverance,” the epigrams that this study has met on nearly every page. Antiquity itself registered the cost of the compression: Lactantius, a professional rhetorician, complained that in eloquence Tertullian “had little readiness, and was not sufficiently polished, and very obscure” (*Divine Institutes* 5.1)—and antiquity kept quoting him anyway, because obscurity of texture and memorability of phrase turned out to be different things. The judgment that matters historically is not aesthetic: his manner—definition, distinction, antithesis, maxim—is already the working method of Latin theology, and the first reader known to have studied him daily was the next great African theologian, Cyprian, whose treatises rework his themes (see the reception section). To a remarkable degree, Latin theology argues the way its first practitioner wrote.

9.5 The verdict, with limits

The title, then, survives audit in a precise form. He is not the first Latin Christian, nor the first Christian writer in Africa, nor the inventor of the Latin Bible, nor the theological equal, in later eyes, of the tradition he equipped; and one candid limit must stand beside every list of coinages—the identical vocabulary served him, within a few years, to argue positions the church refused. But as the first person known to have thought through the whole Christian system in Latin, and to have left the language permanently stocked with the words the dogmas would need, he has no competitor. Jerome’s ranking—“chief of the Latin writers”—and Benedict XVI’s 2007 characterization of him as the beginner of Christian Latin literature and theology are, on this point, reception and history in agreement.

10 The New Prophecy and the Hardening of Discipline

10.1 A movement from Phrygia

In the later second century a prophetic revival arose in the interior of Asia Minor. Eusebius’s dossier of hostile witnesses locates its origin with Montanus, a recent convert who began to prophesy in ecstasy in “a certain village called Ardabau in that part of Mysia, which borders upon Phrygia” (*Church History* 5.16.7); with him stood the prophetesses Prisca (Priscilla) and Maximilla. What scandalized the critics was the manner as much as the message: Montanus, the anonymous informant says, “became beside himself, and being suddenly in a sort of frenzy and ecstasy, he raved, and began to babble and utter strange things,” prophesying contrary to the church’s inherited custom (*Church History* 5.16.7); and a second hostile witness, Apollonius, adds the movement’s geography—Montanus was “he who called Pepuza and Tymion, small towns in Phrygia, Jerusalem, wishing to gather people to them from all directions” (*Church History* 5.18.2), a new holy centre in the Anatolian uplands. Its adherents called it the New

Prophecy; its enemies, the Phrygian heresy. The movement claimed that the Paraclete promised in John's Gospel was speaking through its prophets, not to alter the faith but to tighten the discipline: more fasting, no flight in persecution, no remarriage, no pardon in this life for the gravest sins. Asian synods condemned it; at Rome, on Tertullian's own testimony, a bishop first issued letters of peace to the churches of the New Prophecy and then, at Praxeas's urging, recalled them (*Against Praxeas* 1).

10.2 Tertullian's adherence

When and how the New Prophecy reached Carthage is unrecorded. From roughly the period of *Against Marcion* (207/208) onward, Tertullian's works increasingly cite the Paraclete's oracles and defend the movement by name, and he divides Christians into the "spiritual," who receive the new discipline, and the *psychici*—"animal" or "carnally-minded" folk—who do not. The label is a weaponized Scripture text: Paul's contrast between the *psychikos*, the merely natural man who "receiveth not the things of the Spirit," and the *pneumatikos*, the spiritual man (1 Corinthians 2:14–15), is transferred from pagans to fellow Christians, so that the whole Catholic mainstream becomes, by nomenclature alone, the party that has refused the Spirit. The insult does theological work: it concedes that the dispute is not about the creed, while claiming that everything short of the new discipline is unspiritual religion. He is admirably candid about what was and was not at stake: the New Prophecies are rejected, he protests, "not that Montanus and Priscilla and Maximilla preach another God, nor that they disjoin Jesus Christ, . . . but that they plainly teach more frequent fasting than marrying" (*On Fasting* 1). The epigram cut both ways in *On Monogamy*: "Heretics do away with marriages; Psychics accumulate them. The former marry not even once; the latter not only once" (*On Monogamy* 1). The disputes he now prosecuted—may a widower remarry, may a Christian flee persecution, must virgins be veiled, how often must one fast—were disputes of discipline among people who recited the same creed, and Tertullian himself theorized exactly that distinction: "the rule of faith, indeed, is altogether one, alone immoveable and irreformable," while "the other succeeding points of discipline and conversation admit the novelty of correction"—the Paraclete being, on his account, the appointed corrector (*On the Veiling of Virgins* 1). The same opening chapter forged the anti-traditionalist maxim that later reformers of every stripe would borrow from this most tradition-minded of writers: "But our Lord Christ has surnamed Himself Truth, not Custom," and "Whatever savours of opposition to truth, this will be heresy, even (if it be an) ancient custom" (*On the Veiling of Virgins* 1). The man who in *The Chaplet* defended unwritten custom as binding could, when the Spirit's new discipline required it, rank custom below correction; he saw no contradiction, since on his account the same Paraclete stood behind both.

The discipline of persecution shows the hardening most clearly, because here Tertullian's own earlier position was on record. The treatise *On Flight in Persecution* answers a direct pastoral question—"My brother Fabius, you very lately asked. . . whether or not we ought to flee in persecution" (*On Flight in Persecution* 1)—and answers it without mercy: since nothing happens without the will of God, persecution is God's winnowing and "cannot be evaded"; those who have received the Spirit "will neither stoop to flee from persecution nor to buy it off, for they have the Lord Himself, One who will stand by us to aid us in suffering" (*On Flight in Persecution* 1, 14). The work is explicitly partisan: Tertullian tells Fabius that those "not accepting the Comforter, the guide to all truth," naturally oppose him on this question as on others (*On Flight in Persecution* 1)—the Paraclete invoked at the head of the argument, so that the ruling on flight arrives expressly as Spirit-taught discipline. The same treatise preserves the movement's voice directly, for Tertullian quotes the oracles he lived by: "If you are exposed to public infamy, says he, it is for your good; for he who is not exposed to dishonour among men is sure to be so before the Lord"; and, on the manner of dying, "seek not to die on bridal beds, nor in miscarriages, nor in soft fevers, but to die the martyr's death, that He may be glorified who has suffered for you" (*On Flight in Persecution* 9). These quotations are among the few surviving fragments of New Prophecy oracles anywhere, and they survive only because Tertullian deployed them as authorities. Whatever else adherence to the movement meant, this is what it looked like on the page: the same forensic method, now armed with the Spirit's own sayings, deployed to close every exit the weaker brother might have used.

His most bitter late work turned the point of discipline into a point of authority. *On Modesty* opens in outrage at a new leniency: "I hear that there has even been an edict set forth, and a peremptory one too. The *Pontifex Maximus*—that is, the bishop of bishops—issues an edict: 'I remit, to such as have discharged (the requirements of) repentance, the sins both of adultery and of fornication'" (*On Modesty* 1). The mocking titles have traditionally been referred to Callistus of Rome; a substantial body of modern scholarship refers the edict instead to an African bishop; the identification is unresolved, and this study leaves it so. What the treatise shows beyond doubt is the distance travelled by its author: the man who had celebrated the "second repentance" now denies that the church should absolve adultery at all, and confesses the reversal openly—"this too, therefore, shall be a count in my indictment

against the Psychics; against the fellowship of sentiment also which I myself formerly maintained with them” (*On Modesty* 1).

Yet the same late works picture him inside a worshipping congregation, not a conventicle of the pure. *On the Soul* describes, in the present tense, “a sister whose lot it has been to be favoured with sundry gifts of revelation, which she experiences in the Spirit by ecstatic vision amidst the sacred rites of the Lord’s day in the church”; only “after the people are dismissed at the conclusion of the sacred services” does she report what she has seen, and her visions are examined (*On the Soul* 9). Prophecy here operates within the liturgy, under scrutiny, alongside psalms, readings, and petitions. Whatever Tertullian had joined, it still looked, from the inside, like church.

11 Did Tertullian Leave the Church?

11.1 The ancient answers

The ancient tradition is unanimous that he fell, and vague about what falling meant. Jerome says he “was presbyter of the church until middle life, afterwards driven by the envy and abuse of the clergy of the Roman church, he lapsed to the doctrine of Montanus,” and composed volumes “directly against the church” (*On Illustrious Men* 53). Augustine, cataloguing heresies in 428, goes further: Tertullian became a heretic not for his corporeal notion of soul and God but because, joining the Cataphrygians whom he had once opposed, he condemned second marriage as unchastity contrary to apostolic teaching, and then split even from them to found congregations of his own; the *Tertullianistae* dwindled until, in Augustine’s own day, the last few in Carthage returned to the Catholic Church and surrendered their basilica (*On Heresies* 86). The anonymous *Praedestinatus* (c. 430s), a compilation of slight independent value, adds a Tertullianist minister active in Rome under the usurper Maximus (383–388) and a basilica in Carthage where Tertullian’s people gathered until Bishop Aurelius; its embellishments mainly show how little the fifth century still knew.

11.2 What the contemporary record shows—and omits

Tertullian’s own works, our only contemporary evidence, yield a striking double result. On the one hand, real estrangement: he writes of the “carnally-minded” majority with contempt, and in *Against Praxeas* 1 he says plainly, “we indeed, on our part, subsequently withdrew from the carnally-minded on our acknowledgment and maintenance of the Paraclete.” On the other hand, a total absence of the apparatus of schism. Nowhere does he claim a rival bishop, altar, or ordination; nowhere does he unchurch the bishops whose discipline he derides; his New Prophecy circle appears, in *On the Soul* 9, worshipping within the common Sunday liturgy. No ancient source records an excommunication, a synodal condemnation of Tertullian, or a formal act by which he left or was expelled; even Jerome’s “lapse” is doctrinal, not juridical.

11.3 The modern reassessment

On this evidential base, twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholarship substantially rebuilt the question. Douglas Powell’s study of the Tertullianists concluded that the African New Prophecy of Tertullian’s lifetime shows no organizational break: “Nowhere does he refer to Montanist bishops, nowhere does he deny that the African bishops were genuinely bishops, nowhere does he say that the *ecclesia numerus episcoporum* is no true Church” (Powell 1975). Powell’s positive proposal is equally direct: “Originally, we would suggest, the Tertullianistae formed, not a schismatic body, but an *ecclesiola in ecclesia*”—a rigorist fellowship that remained for decades within the Catholic community—while Augustine, at nearly two centuries’ distance, “could be producing the confused explanation of an authentic tradition” (Powell 1975). On this reading Augustine’s neat sequence (Montanist, then founder of his own sect) is a fifth-century construction from the mere existence of a group later called by his name. Timothy Barnes read the *Tertullianistae* as simply the African branch of the Montanists, carrying the local teacher’s name rather than his personal foundation; David Rankin’s full-length study argued that Tertullian probably never left the Catholic church at all, belonging instead to a New Prophecy group within it and pressing his campaign against slackness from inside (Rankin 1995); William Tabbernee has suggested the later group may have been little more than a circle formed around Tertullian’s memory and writings. The older confident narrative—Chapman’s 1912 Catholic Encyclopedia

article could still write that Tertullian “seems to have definitively separated from the Church about 211”—no longer commands assent, for the date rests on nothing.

The reassessment is itself a set of named modern reconstructions, not a new fact. The withdrawal sentence of *Against Praxeas* 1 is real; the New Prophecy had been refused communion in Asia and, after the recalled letters, at Rome; and *On Modesty* treats the bishops’ penitential authority with open scorn. A rupture of some kind—of fellowship, of sympathy, possibly eventually of communion—is not in doubt; its formal, institutional character is. This study therefore reports Tertullian’s status at death as unresolved, with the weight of current scholarship against a formal personal schism.

12 Old Age, Silence, and the End

After *To Scapula* in 212, the record goes quiet. None of the surviving works can be securely dated later, though several of the disciplinary treatises may belong to the following years. Jerome reports that Tertullian went on writing, and his list of what the old man “composed, moreover, directly against the church” is instructive to read against the surviving shelf: “volumes: On modesty, On persecution, On fasts, On monogamy, six books On ecstasy, and a seventh which he wrote Against Apollonius” (*On Illustrious Men* 53). Four of those titles are recognizably the extant *On Modesty*, *On Flight in Persecution*, *On Fasting*, and *On Monogamy*—the fourth century, that is, already read as “against the church” the same disciplinary treatises this study has quoted—while the six books *On Ecstasy* and the reply to the anti-Montanist Apollonius have perished. Jerome adds that “he is said to have lived to a decrepit old age” (*ibid.*). Even Jerome marks this with “he is said”: it is hearsay at a hundred and seventy years’ distance.

Nothing else survives. No ancient writer records the year, place, cause, or circumstances of Tertullian’s death; none records his burial; no grave, relic, shrine, or commemoration is attested in any period; no source reports either a deathbed reconciliation or a final defiance. The date “c. 220” or “c. 225” found in reference works is a convention that splices the end of the datable works (212) with Jerome’s old-age report; Barnes’s compressed alternative—a death not long after 212, perhaps in his forties—remains equally possible. The silence should be stated as what it is. A man whose sentences the Latin church would quote forever disappears from history without a recorded end.

The one thread that runs past his death is the group bearing his name. Augustine’s notice is contemporary witness for its own time: the *Tertullianistae* had dwindled for generations, and their “very few” remaining members in Carthage came over to the Catholic Church, surrendering their basilica, within Augustine’s memory; the related notice in the *Praedestinatus* places the surrender under Bishop Aurelius of Carthage, Augustine’s contemporary (*On Heresies* 86; *Praedestinatus* 86). What the group had been—a schismatic church descending from Tertullian’s own act, the African Montanist community renamed, or a fellowship keeping the master’s books and memory—is precisely what the sources do not say. Its end, at least, is documented: the last African rigorists walked back into the basilica of the bishops their founder had mocked, and handed over the keys.

13 Reception: The Master Nobody Canonized

13.1 Ancient and late-antique judgment

The shape of Tertullian’s reception was fixed early: indispensable and suspect, in that order. Cyprian, bishop of Carthage within a generation of him, is reported never to have passed a day without reading him, asking his secretary, “Give me the master” (Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 53)—and Cyprian’s surviving treatises rework Tertullian’s themes without naming him. Lactantius, the first to survey Latin Christian letters, granted that Tertullian “was skilled in literature of every kind” but complained that “in eloquence he had little readiness, and was not sufficiently polished, and very obscure” (*Divine Institutes* 5.1)—a stylist’s verdict on a style that the following centuries nevertheless kept quoting. Eusebius cited the *Apology* with respect; Jerome made him “chief of the Latin writers” after none.

Augustine’s engagement is the most instructive, because it runs in both directions at once. Cataloguing heresies in 428, he made Tertullian a heretic and the Tertullianists a sect (*On Heresies* 86); answering a speculative layman on the soul’s origin, he congratulated the man for having “kept himself uninfluenced by the ravings of Tertullian,” who “insisted, that as the soul is corporeal, so likewise is God” (*On the Soul and its Origin* 2.9). Yet the same Augustine demonstrably worked with Tertullian’s *A Treatise on the Soul* and the moral treatises: the African master was refuted

by name and used without it. Vincent of Lérins then gave the ambivalence its classical form: “who more learned than he, who more versed in knowledge whether divine or human?”—and yet, adopting Hilary’s judgment that “by his subsequent error he detracted from the authority of his approved writings,” Vincent concluded that Tertullian, like Origen among the Greeks, “was a great trial in the Church” (*Commonitorium* 18). By the sixth century the so-called Gelasian Decree, a Roman index of receivable and non-receivable books, simply listed the works of Tertullian among the *apocrypha*, between the history of Eusebius and the works of Lactantius—not condemned for a doctrine, but not to be received as authoritative either (*Decretum Gelasianum*, list of apocrypha).

13.2 Survival by a thread: the manuscripts

What a church will not canonize it may still copy, and the copying is its own verdict: grudging, thin, and just sufficient. The *Apology* travelled well—at least thirty-nine manuscripts, many containing it alone. The rest of the corpus survived in a handful of late collections, of which the specialist census (this study follows the Tertullian Project’s) counts five: the great Cluny corpus of twenty-odd works, copied from the eleventh century onward; the Agobardine corpus, whose one surviving witness, Codex Agobardinus (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, lat. 1622), a ninth-century book once owned by Bishop Agobard of Lyons, has lost its back half and preserves thirteen works of the twenty-one its own table of contents promises; the Trecensis corpus, surviving in a single twelfth-century manuscript; the Ottobonian corpus, four works in one Vatican manuscript identified only in the twentieth century; and the Corbie corpus, which gathered precisely the works reckoned heretical, and every manuscript of which had disappeared by about 1600. The loss fell exactly where the corpus was most inflammatory, and it means that several treatises—*On Fasting* and *On Modesty* among them—survive today only because printers reached them first: Beatus Rhenanus produced the first printed edition at Basel in 1521 from two manuscripts, one now lost, and the editions of Mesnart (1545) and Gelenius (1550) printed works whose manuscript sources subsequently vanished. A substantial part of what this study quotes therefore rests on sixteenth-century printings of books no one has seen since. The margin by which the first Latin theologian escaped oblivion was, at several points, one copy wide.

13.3 Not a saint, and yet a Father

Tertullian was never canonized and has no feast; no cult, calendar entry, or liturgical commemoration of him, ancient or modern, was located in the research for this study (a bounded negative search; see the appendix). He is likewise no Doctor of the Church—a title requiring sanctity as well as eminent doctrine. Yet he is universally treated as a Church Father in the broad sense: the patristic manuals, the critical editions of the Fathers, and the Church’s own documents handle him as a primary witness to ancient faith and practice. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* quotes his *On Prayer* for the Lord’s Prayer as “the summary of the whole Gospel” (CCC 2761); Benedict XVI gave him an entire general audience in his patristic catecheses (30 May 2007), presenting the man who began Christian Latin literature, crediting him expressly with introducing the Latin terms “one substance” and “three Persons” for the Trinitarian mystery, and quoting the seed-of-blood epigram back into the Church’s ordinary teaching—and who yet, in the same catechesis, stands as the great theologian who lacked the humility to remain with the Church and to bear his own and others’ weaknesses; for Benedict, a standing lesson that theological brilliance without that humility consumes itself. Selective citation, it should be stressed, is reception of particular formulations, not rehabilitation of the whole corpus or a judgment on the man’s end.

13.4 The contested pages

An honest account keeps the pages later ages winced at. The treatise *On the Apparel of Women* addresses its readers, on the strength of Eve’s primacy in the Fall, in the sentence for which Tertullian is now most often indicted: “You are the devil’s gateway: you are the unsealer of that (forbidden) tree: you are the first deserter of the divine law” (*On the Apparel of Women* 1.1). It stands in a genre of moral invective against luxury, in a corpus that also praises the shared discipleship of husband and wife (*To His Wife* 2.8), honors Perpetua as “the most heroic martyr” (*On the Soul* 55), and reports women exercising recognized prophetic gifts in the liturgy (*On the Soul* 9); but the sentence is his, the theology of blame in it is his, and no genre plea dissolves it. Similarly, the closing chapter of *The Shows* savors the damnation of the persecutors, philosophers, and actors as the best spectacle of all—“What there excites my admiration? What my derision? Which sight gives me joy?” (*The Shows* 30)—a page that has served every critic of Christian vindictiveness from the Enlightenment onward. The rigorist imagination that made Tertullian a

matchless witness against comfortable Christianity is the same one that could not wait for mercy. Both facts belong to his legacy.

A third contested page exists only in reception. The slogan “credo quia absurdum,” endlessly attributed to him as the motto of fideist unreason, occurs nowhere in his works; what he wrote (*On the Flesh of Christ* 5, quoted with its Latin in the theology section) is a controlled paradox about why so shameful a story would never have been invented. The misquotation has functioned for centuries as a portable indictment of Christian irrationality, and its career tells more about his reputation than about his text: Tertullian became the man to whom Western culture ascribes the sayings it needs an extremist to have said. The remedy, here as throughout, is the locus itself.

13.5 The modern rebalancing

Modern scholarship, meanwhile, quietly returned him to the Church’s history, and the return can be dated by its instruments. The Vienna corpus (CSEL) issued critical texts of Tertullian in successive volumes from 1890 to 1957; the twentieth century added the studies that dismantled the legendary biography (Barnes 1971) and re-examined the “schism” (Powell 1975; Rankin 1995). Eric Osborn’s *Tertullian, First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge, 1997) argued—in its publisher’s summary, for the book itself was not read for this study—that a thinker “for a long time misquoted and misused” now calls for sustained analysis, and offered a full reappraisal of his theology’s influence on the Western tradition; Geoffrey Dunn’s *Tertullian* (Routledge, 2004) put fresh translations and an accessible introduction into student hands. Where the nineteenth century wrote confidently of “Tertullian the Montanist,” the current literature writes of a Catholic controversialist of rigorist temper whose New Prophecy allegiance need not have carried him out of communion, whose “sect” may be an artifact of fifth-century cataloguing, and whose lay voice—if lay he was—is among the most important we possess for ante-Nicene Christianity. The paradox Vincent named remains: the Latin Church’s first master theologian is the one it can quote but not celebrate.

14 Conclusion: Fierce Fidelity

Strip away the unverifiable portrait—the centurion’s son, the Roman jurist, the priest—and what remains is in some ways more impressive: a married layman of Carthage who, in about sixteen documented years, created Christian Latin literature almost single-handedly. He gave the persecuted church a legal defense it could be proud of; he gave the Latin language its working terms for the Trinity and the person of Christ; he described, first and best, the baptisms, prayers, penances, offerings, and marriages of an ancient Christian community; he built the argument from apostolic tradition that his Catholic successors would use for centuries; and he stamped on Western Christianity a conviction it has never lost, that faith is a discipline of the body or it is nothing.

The same evidence shows what the fierceness cost. Tertullian’s certainty that the Spirit demanded ever more—more fasting, no remarriage, no pardon for the flesh’s gravest failures, no flight from the persecutor—set him against the bishops’ pastoral practice and, in his own words, withdrew him from the “carnally-minded.” Whether that withdrawal ever became formal schism, the contemporary record does not say, and the late reports that say it do not inspire confidence; the modern reassessment has restored real uncertainty where certainty of his apostasy once reigned. What is certain is the judgment of the church that kept reading him: master and warning at once, quoted by the Catechism and absent from the calendar.

Perhaps the most exact epitaph is the one his own theology supplies. He taught that the flesh is the hinge of salvation—that God saves not disembodied spirits but patient, humiliated, mortal bodies. Patience with bodies, his own included, was the one discipline he could not keep; he even wrote *Of Patience* confessing himself “most miserable, ever sick with the heats of impatience,” like the invalid who praises the health he lacks (*Of Patience* 1). The Church received the doctrine and declined the temper, which is, on the evidence of this study, roughly what he deserved and perhaps what he expected. Even the transmission enacted the verdict: the church that would not celebrate him copied him so sparingly that several of his fiercest books reached print one manuscript ahead of oblivion, while the *Apology* it could use travelled in dozens of copies. His last securely dated sentence pleaded for his persecutors’ souls; his tradition ends with his followers returning quietly to the bishops’ communion. Between those two facts the unresolved question of Tertullian—inside or outside—keeps its permanent, instructive tension.

A Scope, Chronology, and Evidence

A.1 Identity, names, and range

Subject: Tertullian of Carthage, transmitted in the manuscripts as Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus and self-named once as “Septimius Tertullianus” (*On the Veiling of Virgins* 17). Whole-life range used in this study: born c. 155–170 (no ancient evidence; modern estimate from the career), documented literary activity c. 196/197–212, died after 212 at an unknown date; the customary “c. 220/225” rests on Jerome’s old-age report and is treated as convention, not fact. Principal place: Carthage, capital of Roman Africa Proconsularis (near modern Tunis). A period of residence in Rome is suggested by Eusebius’s description but is not established by Tertullian’s own works and is treated as unverified.

A.2 Reader, question, and thesis boundary

Written for a serious general reader, student, or researcher who wants one coherent, evidence-controlled life. The governing questions are stated in the opening section. The thesis—that Tertullian’s achievement and his estrangement flow from one rigorist temperament, and that his formal ecclesiastical fate is unresolved—is a historical synthesis. This study does not decide his eternal state, adjudicate the Callistus/African-bishop identification, reconstruct his opponents independently, settle New Prophecy institutional history, or issue any theological or canonical judgment; it claims no ecclesiastical review or approval.

A.3 Corpus and citation conventions

Thirty-one Latin treatises are accepted as authentic; the corpus section gives a work-by-work inventory, and every one of the thirty-one is cited in this study from at least one verified locus. Citations use conventional English titles and the chapter numbers of the Ante-Nicene Fathers translation (vols. 3–4, Buffalo 1885), whose wording is used for all quotations of Tertullian and of most other ancient authors; quotations were checked against the online transcriptions identified in the References on 2026-07-24 and 2026-07-25. Latin phrases are given only where checked against an online Latin text on 2026-07-25 (*Against Praxeas* 2, 27; *On the Flesh of Christ* 5; *Apology* 17; *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 8) or where expressly labeled a famous transmitted tag (*semen est sanguis Christianorum*; *fiunt, non nascuntur Christiani*; *Da magistrum*). Works are dated only where stated in the text; relative chronology of the undated works is disputed, the customary pre-Montanist/transitional/Montanist grouping is reported as a convention under review, and no work-by-work chronology is asserted. Spurious and doubtful works (e.g., *Against All Heresies*) are not used. Lost works (the Greek treatises, *On Ecstasy*) are cited only as reported by Tertullian or Jerome. At *On Idolatry* 19 both online transcriptions consulted print a garbled word at the famous “unbelted every soldier” clause; the standard printed reading is reported as such rather than quoted.

A.4 Evidence classes

Class	Meaning
A	Tertullian’s own works: contemporary, but advocacy and self-presentation; each claim limited by genre, occasion, and polemical purpose.
N	Contemporary or near-contemporary external witness (Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs; Passion of Perpetua and Felicity).
E	Early received tradition: Lactantius, Eusebius, Jerome, Augustine, Vincent of Lérins; evidence of reception and of otherwise lost reports, written 90–230 years after the subject.
L	Later tradition: Praedestinatus, the Gelasian Decree, medieval transmission, early-modern and confessional portraits.
M	Official ecclesial reception, limited to each act’s actual object (Catechism citations; Benedict XVI’s catechesis of 30 May 2007).

Class	Meaning
K	Named modern critical reconstruction (Barnes, Powell, Rankin, Tabbernee, and reviewers), used to its stated premises.
S	Source-grounded project synthesis, never attributed to a source.

A.5 Chronology

Dates below are claims with stated bases; “convention” marks customary dates this study does not assert as established.

Date	Event	Basis	Status
c. 155–170	Birth, presumably at or near Carthage	Modern estimate from career; no ancient evidence	Range only
180, 17 Jul before c. 195	Scillitan martyrs tried at Carthage Conversion to Christianity	Consular date in the Acts (N) Inference from A (convert’s voice); no date, place, or circumstance recorded	Secure Event secure, details unknown
c. 196/197	First datable works (<i>To the Nations, Apology</i>)	Internal allusions; standard scholarship (K)	Plausible
c. 197–212	The undated bulk of the corpus (catechetical, disciplinary, and polemical works; see the inventory)	No internal dates; specialist consensus is that no agreed sequence exists (K)	Windows only; not asserted
c. 198–206	Customary window for the catechetical cluster (<i>On Baptism, On Prayer, On Repentance, Prescription</i> , and related works)	Handbook convention (K); nothing in the texts	Convention only
203, 7 Mar	Perpetua and Felicity die at Carthage	Passio tradition (N/E); Tertullian cites Perpetua (A)	Secure (year); day traditional
207/208	Third edition of <i>Against Marcion</i> in progress	“Fifteenth of the Emperor Severus” (A: 1.15)	Secure
c. 205–212	Open adherence to the New Prophecy; disciplinary works against the <i>psychici</i>	A (<i>On Fasting, On Monogamy, Against Praxeas</i> 1)	Secure as tendency; no dated “conversion”
211	Soldier’s refusal of the crown at an imperial donative	<i>The Chaplet</i> 1 (A); donative linked to 211 by scholarship (K)	Plausible
212, after 14 Aug	<i>To Scapula</i>	Utica darkness (A: 3), identified with the eclipse of 14 Aug 212 (K)	Plausible–secure
after 212	Later disciplinary works; lost writings; old age	Jerome’s hearsay report (E)	Unresolved
c. 220/225	Death (customary date)	Convention splicing 212 with Jerome’s old age	Convention only
late 4th c.	Tertullianists active (Rome, Carthage)	Augustine (E, for his own time); <i>Praedestinatus</i> (L)	Secure for existence
c. 390s–420s	Last Tertullianists rejoin the Catholic Church of Carthage	Augustine, <i>On Heresies</i> 86 (E)	Secure
9th c.	Codex Agobardinus copied (Paris, BnF lat. 1622); oldest surviving corpus manuscript, back half now lost	Manuscript census at the Tertullian Project (L/K)	Secure
1521	First printed edition (Beatus Rhenanus, Basel), from two manuscripts, one since lost	Edition history at the Tertullian Project (L/K)	Secure
1545/1550	Mesnart and Gelenius print works whose manuscripts subsequently vanished (incl. <i>On Fasting, On Modesty</i>)	Edition history at the Tertullian Project (L/K)	Secure

A.6 Received traditions under audit

The full audit is maintained in the research records; this table summarizes the traditions most often repeated about Tertullian, each with its earliest located witness and the treatment adopted in this study.

Tradition	Earliest witness	Counter-evidence	Treatment
Presbyter of Carthage	Jerome, <i>On Illustrious Men</i> 53 (c. 392/393)	Lay self-placement: “Are not even we laics priests?” (<i>On Exhortation to Chastity</i> 7); lay “we” (<i>On Monogamy</i> 12)	Not called a priest; both witnesses reported
Son of a proconsular centurion	Jerome, <i>ibid.</i>	Barnes: no such office existed; likely textual corruption (reported in Frend 1974)	Tradition under review, not fact
Professional jurist; the Tertullianus of the <i>Digest</i>	Eusebius, <i>Church History</i> 2.2.4 (“versed in the laws”)	Identification rejected by Barnes; Eusebius may infer from the <i>Apology</i> ’s forensic manner	“Forensic mind” asserted; bar career and <i>Digest</i> identity not
Cyprian’s daily “Give me the master”	Jerome, <i>ibid.</i> , from Paul of Concordia’s report of Cyprian’s secretary	None; but anecdote at two removes, c. 140 years later	Quoted as Jerome’s report
Driven to Montanism by envy of the Roman clergy	Jerome, <i>ibid.</i>	Explains nothing African; no earlier source	Reported as Jerome’s claim only
Formal secession; founder of the Tertullianists	Jerome (doctrinal “lapse”); Augustine, <i>On Heresies</i> 86 (428)	No excommunication, synod, rival bishop, altar, or ordination attested; his circle inside the Sunday liturgy (<i>On the Soul</i> 9); Powell, Rankin, Tabbernee	Estrangement certain; formal schism unresolved
Death c. 220/225 in extreme old age	Jerome, <i>ibid.</i> , expressly as hearsay	No death record of any kind; Barnes’s short chronology equally open	Convention labeled as such
“Credo quia absurdum”	No ancient source in that form	The actual text reads “it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd”— <i>prorsus credibile est, quia ineptum est</i> (<i>On the Flesh of Christ</i> 5, checked in Latin)	Slogan excluded; real sentence quoted
Cult, feast, relics, images	None located in any period	—	Bounded negative result

A.7 Method, limits, and negative results

Earliest controlled evidence governs; witnesses separated by centuries are never silently merged, and disagreements (birth and death dates, presbyterate, the schism question, the *On Modesty* bishop) are preserved. Geographic and linguistic limits: the study reads English translations of Latin and Greek sources; no manuscript, epigraphic, or archaeological research was undertaken, and no claim depends on unverified Latin wording except the famous tags expressly labeled as such. Bounded negative results: no ancient or modern liturgical commemoration, feast, cult, relic, grave, or canonization of Tertullian was located; no record of an excommunication or formal act of schism was located; no dedicated public commemoration of an anniversary of his death was located in searches conducted on 2026-07-24. These are bounded, correctable search results, not proofs of absence. Mutable online sources (Vatican website, Tertullian Project, CCEL, New Advent, Early Christian Writings, The Latin Library, publisher and library-guide pages) were used as checked on 2026-07-24 and 2026-07-25. The manuscript and edition history in the reception section follows the census pages of the Tertullian Project as checked on 2026-07-25 and was not verified against library catalogues; the attribution of the *Passion of Perpetua*’s editing to Tertullian is reported as a modern guess and not asserted; the Minucius Felix priority question is reported as unresolved.

A.8 Rights and review state

Project prose is original; ancient quotations follow the public-domain Ante-Nicene Fathers translation (1885) and other public-domain nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century translations identified in the References. Copyrighted modern translations (e.g., of Augustine’s *On Heresies*) and modern scholarship are paraphrased or quoted only in brief attributed snippets within ordinary scholarly quotation; Vatican texts are paraphrased with citation. This publication has received internal editorial checking only: no independent specialist, theological, or ecclesiastical review, and no rights opinion, is claimed.

B References

All web sources were accessed and checked on 2026-07-24 or 2026-07-25. Ancient-work citations in the text use conventional English titles with the chapter numbering of the translations listed here.

Primary sources: Tertullian

- Tertullian, works in English translation: *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vols. 3–4, ed. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, A. C. Coxe (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885). Quotations follow the transcriptions at New Advent (<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/>) and CCEL (<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf03.html> and <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf04.html>). Works quoted: *Apology* 2, 17, 18, 30, 37, 39, 40, 50; *To the Nations* 1.1, 1.7, 1.8; *The Testimony of the Soul* 1, 2, 5, 6; *To the Martyrs* 1, 2, 3; *To Scapula* 2, 3, 4, 5; *An Answer to the Jews* 1, 7; *The Chaplet* 1, 3, 11; *On Baptism* 1, 4, 7, 8, 15, 17, 18; *On Prayer* 1, 25, 29; *On Repentance* 4, 7, 9; *Of Patience* 1; *To His Wife* 1.1, 2.8; *Prescription Against Heretics* 7, 13, 36; *Against Marcion* 1.1, 1.15, 3.24, 4.2; *Against Hermogenes* 1, 2; *Against the Valentinians* 1, 3; *On the Flesh of Christ* 1, 5; *Against Praxeas* 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, 25, 27; *Scorpiace* 1; *A Treatise on the Soul* 9, 20, 55, 58; *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* 1, 8; *On the Veiling of Virgins* 1, 17; *On Exhortation to Chastity* 7; *On Monogamy* 1, 12; *On Fasting* 1; *On Modesty* 1, 21; *On the Apparel of Women* 1.1, 2.13; *On Idolatry* 1, 14, 19; *The Shows* 4, 25, 30; *On Flight in Persecution* 1, 9, 14; *On the Pallium* 1, 6. The translation is public domain; underlying Latin is ancient and public domain.
- Latin control texts for the tags quoted in Latin: *Adversus Praxean* 2 and 27 at the Tertullian Project (https://www.tertullian.org/latin/adversus_praxean.htm); *De carne Christi* 5 and *Apologeticum* 17 at The Latin Library (<https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/tertullian/tertullian.carne.shtml>; <https://www.thelatinlibrary.com/tertullian/tertullian.apol.shtml>); *De resurrectione carnis* 8 at the Tertullian Project (https://www.tertullian.org/latin/de_resurrectione_carnis.htm). The Latin of *semen est sanguis Christianorum* is quoted as the famous transmitted tag; the ANF English at *Apology* 50 was verified.

Primary sources: other ancient witnesses

- *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*, public-domain English translation at Early Christian Writings (<https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/scillitan.html>).
- *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity* 1–3, 15, public-domain English translation at Early Christian Writings (<https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/perpetua.html>).
- Theophilus of Antioch, *To Autolycus* 2.15, ANF vol. 2 translation at New Advent (<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02042.htm>).
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- Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 5.1, ANF vol. 7 translation at New Advent (<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/07015.htm>).
- Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 53, NPNF series 2 vol. 3 translation at New Advent (<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2708.htm>). “Give me the master” renders Jerome’s public-domain Latin *Da magistrum* as given in this translation.

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- Augustine, *On the Soul and its Origin* 2.9, NPNF series 1 translation at New Advent (<https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/15082.htm>).
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- J. Chapman, “Tertullian,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 14 (New York, 1912), at New Advent (<https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14520c.htm>); cited as reception history and quoted briefly on the Latin Bible, the theological idiom, and the debt to Irenaeus.

Transmission, editions, and finding aids

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Modern scholarship

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