

Some Nuances in the Ecclesiology of the Donatists*

To read through the anti-Donatist works of Augustine, even in so fine an edition as the five volumes of the *Bibliothèque Augustinienne*, can easily become quite tedious. The same arguments recur again and again, not only from one treatise to another, but many times within the same treatise. The historical facts concerning the origins of the schism are constantly rehearsed; the theological arguments are refined to the n^{th} degree. When one considers the lost treatises (some eight in number), not to mention the numerous sermons and letters devoted to the problem, one wonders who these opponents were. Were they really such dunces, incapable of understanding what so often seems to us the clear and inexorable logic of Augustine's reasoning? Or were they hopeless fanatics who could not be turned from the path of self-isolation?

Despite all the words, it seems that in the end, it was governmental coercion that brought the Donatists back to the *Pax catholica*. We may ask with recent scholars: Did and could Augustine, the thoroughly Romanized intellectual, even begin to understand the minds and hearts of rural North African peasants? Most Donatists did not and probably were not capable of reading Augustine's writings. They would rarely have the opportunity of hearing the sermons of able Catholic apologists, despite the exertions of the indefatigable Augustine. The arguments which may seem so obvious to us may not really have been so obvious or convincing to men who began from very different presuppositions about what the Catholic Church was supposed to be.

Consider too some of the opponents whom the bishop of Hippo addressed in his writings. There was Cresconius, the foolish teacher of grammar who rushed in where the Donatist angels—their bishops—

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feared to tread. There was Centurius, another layman, who brought an allegedly anonymous treatise to the door of Augustine's church, not to mention the « Donatista nescio quem » whom Augustine answered in another work. In short, Augustine evidently felt obliged to reply to everything that came his way and inevitably many of these opponents were entirely out of his class. Even in the case of a capable opponent like Petilian of Constantine, the principal Donatist spokesman after the era of Parmenian, one may question to what extent a serious theological dialogue was possible¹.

We are assured² that their leaders shunned Augustine and attempted to withhold their own writings from the Catholics because they feared his prowess, a prowess which they attempted to discredit by calling him a mere dialectician, by which they meant, a sophist who could twist any argument to his own advantage³. Even if his opponents had been better theologians than we give them credit for being, to what extent were they prisoners of their own tradition and their own uncompromising followers? One may well speculate on the degree to which otherwise capable spokesmen were driven to demagoguery by the demands of their position and their constituencies.

There is more than one case in the history of the Church in which the *lex orandi*, liturgical practice, has gone too far too fast and established a tradition leaving the *lex credendi* with the burden of finding a theological justification for the practice. It is true that the practice of indiscriminate rebaptism, extending even to orthodox Christians from outside Africa, was derived from and based on a long-standing African tradition supported by the authority of Cyprian, yet it was also a policy put into effect before the implications were clear or had been thought through. Donatism, we know, was never a hot-bed of intellectualism and the man who is usually regarded as its most creative mind, Tyconius, in putting forward a policy of moderation and in asking questions, found himself in a limbo between the two warring factions.

Augustine's writings which combat Donatism repeat lines of argumentation which soon became stylized into a clear pattern retraced ad nau-

1. During a visit by Augustine to the city of Constantine for the purpose of ordaining a new bishop, Fortunatus, Alypius brought to his attention part of a pastoral letter of Petilian attacking the Catholics. Augustine, knowing of Petilian's high reputation, found it hard to believe that he was the author. « Quam cum legissem, ita miratus sum... ut nollem credere illius hominis esse litteras, quem solet fama praedicare quod inter eos doctrina atque facundia maxime excellat... » (*Contra litteras Petiliani* I, 1, 1. BA 30, p. 134).

2. « Respondeant si quid volunt, et si nobis nolunt, saltem ad suos litteras mittant, quas tamen nobis occultari non iubeant. » (*Contra litteras Petiliani* I. 25. 27; BA 30, p. 182).

3. « ...me doctores vestri velut hominem dialecticum merito fugendum potius et cavendum quam refellendum revincendumque censuerint. » (*Contra Cresconium* I. 13. 16; BA 31, pp. 102, 104.)

seam. Recalling that, to a great extent, we know the Donatist position only through Augustine's refutations, the purpose of this paper is to suggest that the Donatist attitudes on certain questions were not so monolithic as Augustine would lead one to believe. Augustine's argument from the universality or catholicity of the Church may seem to us to deal a mortal blow to the Donatists, confined, as they were, to Africa. Yet consider the remark of one of their spokesmen at the Conference of Carthage of June, 411. (One of the few independent sources for their teaching.) Augustine's argument is simple: the true Church is Catholic; it is his party that is in communion with the rest of the Christian world; Therefore, his party is the Catholic Church in Africa. The reply of Bishop Emeritus of Caesarea on the third and decisive day of the conference in the *Thermae Gargilianae* is worthy of note.

Basically, he says that the fact that Augustine's party is in communion with the rest of the Catholic Church proves nothing except that the rest of the Catholic Church is in communion with the wrong group. The question of which faction is the Catholic Church in Africa is precisely the issue to be decided at the Conference. The rest of the Church would do well to maintain a neutral stance and enter into communion with the victorious party after the Conference⁴. Such a position, if taken seriously as it should be, simply collides with Augustine's assumption that the faction presently in communion with the world Church must be the Catholic Church in Africa. Notice too that Emeritus' position, later supported by Petilian⁵, does not coincide with Augustine's claim that the Donatists considered the Catholic Church outside Africa as no church at all because it had entered into communion with the African *traditores*.

A second issue which requires a more cautious approach is the matter of the presence of sinners in the Church. The Donatists claimed to be the Church of the saints, or at least, the sons of the martyrs, as opposed to the Catholics, the sons of the traitors. In arguing that this Donatist claim was untenable, Augustine could point to the notorious sinners among them, notably Bishop Optatus of Tingad, the all-powerful and ruthless cohort of Count Gildo. Again, Augustine never tired of indicating the inconsistency of Donatist practice with Donatist theory in the affair

4. « Quicumque iustis legitimisque ex causis, Christianus fuerit approbatus ille meus est Catholicus, illi hoc nomen imponitur, ille debet sibi hanc regulam vindicare; quamvis ipsa Catholica, quae nunc pro praescriptione partis adversae quasi in fronte quadam rite adversum nos temperari cognoscitur, medium esse debet; et in iudicio ita constitui, ut hoc nomen victor accipiat. Intelligit praestantia tua nihil nobis de peregrinis, nihil nobis de longe positis praeiudicare posse, cum inter Afros hoc negotium ventiletur; sed magis hoc exspectari, ut quicumque ex veridica cognitione fuerit superatus, is ab orbe videatur esse reiectus. » Emeritus of Caesarea (*Coll. Carth.* III, 99. *PL XI*, cc. 1380-81).

5. « Non est equidem pars catholica, nisi quae hulus conflictationis sumpserit palmam. » Petilian of Constantine (*Coll. Carth.* III, 146. *PL XI*, c. 1389).

of the Maximianist schism. Augustine saw in that schism the hand of God, a providential contemporary replay of the original cleavage nearly a century before. « Notice how God has paid them in their own coin for their indictment of Caecilian. The coincidence is striking ; in God's design, after all these years, the wheel is come full circle, they are faced with the past⁶ ». If the alleged crimes of Caecilian and other traitors soiled the Catholic communion, argued Augustine, then why did not the Maximianist schismatics do the same for the Donatist communion, these new schismatics who had been so violently denounced by the Donatist council of Bagai and then were received back without rebaptism ? As Père de Veer has shown, this parallelism meant much more to Augustine than to the Donatists whose ecclesiological presuppositions were so different⁷.

Augustine's argument remained constant : the Donatists claimed to be a Church uncontaminated by the presence of sinners, known or unknown⁸. He argued, of course, that they did have their share of sinful members, although in the Augustinian theology, this was not a decisive point. What exactly did the Donatists claim ? Here again, a few nuances are in order. Donatist opinion was not so monolithic as Augustine would have us believe.

In the Conference of 411 the official Donatist statement read during the third session indicates, on the contrary, that they admitted the presence of secret sinners in the Church.

« They (the Catholics) say that both good and evil are caught in the one net and are brought to shore, i.e., the just and the unjust are together until the end of time, not perceiving that this was said of the wicked who are concealed, since in speaking of a net cast into the sea, the contents are not known by the fishermen, i.e., the priests, until brought to shore for the selection process and the good and bad are brought forth⁹. »

6. « Vide quomodo illis Deus reddidit quod de Caeciliano dixerunt. Mira similitudo ; voluit Deus post tot annos revolvere illis in faciem quod gestum est, ut omnino unde dissimulent et qua effugiant non inveniant. Oblitos se dicerent quae gesta sunt ante ; non eos Deus sinit oblivisci... » (*Enarr. in Ps. 36, Sermo II, 19. CC vol. 38, p. 360*).

7. A. C. DE VEER, *L'exploitation du schisme maximianiste par saint Augustin dans sa lutte contre le Donatisme*, in *Rech. Aug. III*, pp. 219-37, (Paris, 1965).

8. This was part of his argument from the very beginning. e. g. *Ps. Contra Partem Donati*, Stanza 22. « Homines multum superbi
Qui se dicunt iustos esse. »

9. « Pisces etiam bonos et malos uno reticulo usque ad littus, i. e., iustos et iniustos usque in finem saeculi simul contineri et protrahi confirmant, non intuentes hoc de reis latentibus dictum, quoniam reticulum in mari positum quid habeat a piscatoribus, i. e., a sacerdotibus, ignoratur, donec extractum ad littus ad purificationem boni seu mali prodantur. Ita et latentes et in Ecclesia constituti, et a sacerdotibus ignorati, in divino iudicio proditi, tamquam pisces mali, a sanctorum consortio separantur... » (*Coll. Carth. III, 258. PL XI, c. 1410*).

When Augustine cited *Matt* 3. 12, « He will clear the threshing floor and gather his grain into the barn ». (referring to the eschatological judgment), Petilian countered : « De occultis eis dixit Evangelista, quod tu vis tecum permixtos¹⁰ »

Here then, at least, it seems that Augustine's polemic generalization of the Donatist opinions about the presence of sinners in the Church is exaggerated. On the contrary, some responsible Donatist opinion did not claim that their Church had no sinners at all within it. Rather they claimed that they, unlike the Catholics, made a real effort to purge their ranks of known sinners. Secret sinners there were in the Church of the Martyrs, these Donatists admitted ; they would be dealt with at the Last Judgment. Seen in this way, the differences between the two points of view are not so great after all. Despite the narrowing of differences in practice, the dialogue of the deaf continued. Augustine maintained that the Catholic Church was not lax in making use of excommunication in dealing with public sinners, yet he weakened his case by admitting that sometimes authority could do nothing and the wicked must be tolerated for the sake of charity, peace and unity. It is clear then that some of our views on the ecclesiology of the Donatists need slight revision at least. As so often in the history of the Church, even when the distances are not really so great, little can be accomplished if the will to understand is weak or absent.

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10. *Coll. Carth.* III, 263. *PL* XI, c. 1414.