



Augustine Anti-Donatist Writings

Prayer Before Studying Theology (A Prayer for the Peace and Unity of Christ's Church):

O God, the Father of our Savior, Jesus Christ, give us the grace seriously to take to heart the great dangers we are in by our unhappy division. Remove from us all hatred and prejudice and whatever else may keep us from union and concord. As there is but one Body and one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, so may we all be of one heart and of one soul, united in one holy bond of truth and peace, of faith and charity. May we together glorify you through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

--Terence Cardinal Cooke

Background: North African Christianity

- There is no way to understand the peculiar character of the Donatist movement apart from the peculiar characteristics of North African rural Christianity. North Africa was, by comparison with Italy and Gaul (southern France) rather a wild, backward area in which (unlike Italy) Greek was rarely spoken and peasants lived in tightly knit clannish groups with a sense of independence from Roman central authority and periodic displays of cultural resistance.
- A certain demonization of the Roman central authorities and a veneration of the tombs of the local martyrs provided the basis for local Christian resistance to imperial persecution.

Background: Martyrdom, Persecution and the Problem of Moral and Spiritual Failure

- In 250-251 the Emperor Decius demanded members of the population prove their loyalty to the traditional religion by offering a publicly supervised sacrifice and receiving a certificate to show they had sacrificed.
 - The proconsul of Africa, Anullinus, had gone beyond the letter of the edict to go after not only the clergy but also the laity.
 - Those who refused to sacrifice and stood fast as witnesses to the faith (*martus* [from which we get the word martyr]="witness") were executed.
- Large numbers of Christians either sacrificed or, through bribery, managed to get forged certificates saying they had sacrificed.
 - Laypeople who had sacrificed/offered incense to save their lives and property were regarded as suspect and needing a formal pattern of penance

to be restored to the church (if restoration was even possible after denying Christ).

- Another major persecution was launched under Licinius at the beginning of the fourth century.
 - In this and other official persecutions of the third and early fourth centuries, officials visited the bishops and presbyters and demanded they hand over all their copies of the Christian Scriptures.
 - Some clergy resisted and were imprisoned and/or executed.
 - Others handed over worn out copies of the Scriptures that were no longer in use or even books other than the Scriptures.
 - Some handed over the only copies of the Scriptures that their local church possessed.
 - Clergy who handed over the Scriptures (*traditores*) were often censured by the Church and could be
 - deposed from office,
 - made to do penance or even
 - excommunicated.

The apostasy and compromise of members of the laity and clergy raised some important questions about

- the nature of the Church itself,
- how one enters into the Church through baptism, and
- the degree/extent of communion which can or should be experienced by Christian communities that are divided from one another by real differences.

More specifically, what should the Church's pastoral response be to people who deny the faith or, by sinful actions, willfully separate themselves from the communion of the Church?

- If one can violate the precepts of the Gospel and forsake the communion of Christ's Church, can one still be regarded as part of the Church (and needing to perform penance) or should one be regarded as no longer a part of the Church?
- If the latter, should the person who has been separated from the Church and left the Church be rebaptized when he/she reaffirms the faith and enters the Church again?
- What does it mean to say that the Church is holy? What does this imply about the nature of the obedience and holiness of the individual members of the Church?
 - How should the continuing moral failures of these members be understood and related to the holiness that characterizes the Church?
 - Can people who have committed serious sins (murder, adultery/extra-marital sexuality, denying the faith under persecution) be reconciled and readmitted to the church and how should this be done?

The reason these were live questions was that the North African Christians had traditionally highly emphasized **the visible unity of the Church**, which one entered

through baptism and sought to maintain, preserving the peace and purity through obedience to the precepts of the Gospel.

Could persons who had failed morally and spiritually during times of persecution be reconciled to the Christian community and be readmitted to the Church?

- Various answers were given to this question by different people in different places.
- This inability to agree about what should be done led to bitterness, hostility and schisms (the breaking off of Christian fellowship), which were nearly as damaging to the Church as persecution and martyrdom had been.
 - ("If one keeps dropping the standards and admits as regular members even people who denied the faith and sacrificed to other gods, is one still in the faith? Is one still in the Church described in the Holy Scriptures?")

(a) Some people thought that **those who had failed and lapsed had shown their true character and lack of real commitment and should not be readmitted to the communion of the Church.**

- For the biblical background of this idea, see Heb. 6:4-8; Mt. 26:14-15,49; 27:1-5 (Judas); Acts 5:1-11 (Ananias and Sapphira); and the apostle's remarks on false teachers in 1 Tim. 1:19-20; Tit. 1:15-16; 2 Pet. 2; Jude 4.8-16.

(b) Some thought that **the confessors, i.e. those who had suffered for the faith (whether ordained or unordained) could grant forgiveness to those who had given up the faith under persecution but were repentant and wanted to be reconciled to the Church and be able once again to receive communion.**

- For the biblical background concerning the restoration of those who have fallen away from the faith, see Gal. 6:1 and compare the example of Peter's denial in Mt. 26:74 and Peter's return to Christ in Jn. 21:7,15-19 and note Paul's advice concerning the immoral brother in 1 Cor. 5:1-5 (and 2 Cor. 2:5-11?).
- Note also the role this gave the confessors (even as laypeople) to lead the community and order the affairs of the church.

(c) Others thought if there was to be a uniform policy and careful pastoral judgments made about whom to readmit to the communion of the Church, **only the bishop**, who exercised pastoral oversight over the region and had been appointed under the guidance of other bishops, **should make these decisions.**

- Sometimes, however, the bishop had fled or gone into hiding, while the confessors had remained and suffered; the bishop therefore had to some extent lost his authority and ability to represent the community; these functions had instead passed to the confessors.
- **Sometimes the confessors supported a rigorist leader's claim to the office of bishop (e.g. Novatian in Rome) and refused to recognize the ordination or authority of a person claiming the office of bishop who had a more relaxed policy about readmitting people to communion (e.g. Cornelius).**
 - Once these groups separated from each other and broke communion with each other, **the rigorist group sometimes claimed that it was the one and only true Church, within which alone salvation could be found and whose baptism alone was true baptism.**

- Cut off from this true Church, which is the source of life, one perishes.
- People who leave the Church through heresy or schism are not different branches of the same plant; they have cut themselves off from the tree and are as dead as pagans and should be treated the same way, being rebaptized when they apply for readmission to the Church.
- **The broader church, which had more relaxed standards for readmission, had people who had lapsed do public acts to show repentance for a specified period of time before they were formally received back into the church** through laying on of hands and prayer [**not** rebaptism] and able to receive communion again.)

A related problem subsequently emerged in regard to **how people baptized in heretical or schismatic groups should be readmitted to the Church.**

- Did they people baptized in a heretical or schismatic group need to be rebaptized when the entered the (orthodox/universal) Church?
 - The answer to the question about baptism depends upon a prior question about who is the Church: **Are heretical and schismatic groups to be regarded as deviant parts of the Church or are they not part of the Church at all?**
 - **Is the baptism performed by heretical and schismatic groups to be treated as valid or as invalid?** (If the latter, then persons from these groups *must* be rebaptized when they enter the Church)?
 - If these groups are not are not part of the Church, can they offer a valid baptism? Or **does baptism belong to the Church so that it can only be administered within the Church alone (and never validly by heretical or schismatic groups).**

Rigorist groups (e.g. the Novatianists): No,

- **heretical and schismatic groups are not part of the Church** and
- **cannot administer a baptism valid in the Church**, so
- **people baptized outside the Church need to be rebaptized.**

Firmillian (Cappadocia) and Cyprian (North Africa): We agree.

- **heretical and schismatic groups are not part of the Church** and
- **cannot administer a baptism valid in the Church**, so
- **people baptized outside the Church need to be rebaptized.**

vs.

View Generally Accepted Later:

- **Baptism is valid if performed in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit** (even if the baptism was performed in a schismatic or even an otherwise heretical group) and
- **one need not be rebaptized into this name.**
 - Stephen of Rome had apparently held this view with respect to baptisms performed by schismatics only, not heretics (since heretics might have

formally named the Father, Son and Holy Spirit but, in saying this, might have meant something quite different from what the Church meant).

The Donatist Schism

The peculiar schism of the Donatists was rooted in part in non-theological political questions about rival persons.

- The bishop Secundus of Tigisi (the Numidian primate) had refused to hand over the Scriptures and was imprisoned.
- Another bishop, Mensurius, had hidden the Scriptures and left heretical writings at the church to be seized by the imperial authorities, which was a clever idea but gave him the reputation of being a *traditor*.
- When Mensurius died, Secundus and Lucilla (a wealthy patron of the Church whom Mensurius had offended by criticizing her excessive, showy veneration of the relics of the martyrs) contested the ordination of Mensurius' deacon, Caecilian, to fill the vacant episcopate (primacy), which had been performed in an irregular manner by clergy in and around Carthage without the presence of the Numidian primate Secundus and most of the Numidian bishops.
 - The latter claimed that one of the bishops who had ordained Caecilian was a *traditor* and therefore they themselves named a reader at Carthage, Majorinus, to be the primate of Carthage, opposing Caecilian.

Things then got even more confusing when Constantine not only permitted the practice of Christianity, but even offered funds to the bishops for the rebuilding of churches and relief for the local poor. The problem was this:

- Who was the bishop of Carthage?
- Where there is disagreement as to who is bishop or who is the Church, what do you do? How do you decide?

What if you are North African Christian and a member of one of the two opposing groups?

- How do you relate to the other (opposing) group?
 - Do you treat them as a part of the Church even when visible unity has been lost and there is a profound difference in regard to moral issues or fundamental Christian practices?
 - Or do you demonize them and assume they are not part of the Church and will not be until they admit their mistake and come over to your side?
- If the former (they are part of the Church even though the unity of the Church has been impaired), then in accordance with early Christian practice, you would not rebaptize them if they wanted to join your section of the Church (since they are already Christians and members of the Church).
- If the latter (they are not Christians or members of the Church because the Church is limited to my group), then persons who join my group should be rebaptized.

The Italian bishops and Roman government backed Caecilian and condemned Donatus of Cassae Nigrae (who had replaced Majorinus as Donatist bishop of Carthage) for rebaptizing clergy who had lapsed under persecution. Imperial action against the Donatists in 317, 346 and 363 provoked a reaction that strengthened their position, so that they were a potent force (perhaps even a majority) in many areas of rural North Africa (even in Hippo, where Augustine was bishop). The power of the Donatists thus increased significantly in the 360's and 370's under the leadership of Parmenian, the Donatist primate of Carthage. Parmenian's views were widely accepted, but were opposed by Optatus of Milevis (the Catholic bishop of Milevis in the North African province of Numidia; between 366 and 384 wrote a refutation of Donatism) and the moderate Donatist Tyconius (elder/lay theologian; author of a treatise on biblical interpretation, the *Book of Rules*, whose views on the Church as universal and always a mixed body were condemned by a Donatist council in 380; excommunicated by Parmenian c. 385; died 390-400).

Donatist Views of the Church and Its Holiness: Purity and the Power of Association

Since the Church is to be one holy visible body of faithful Christians (the spotless bride of Christ), it follows that **one must forsake the company of the wicked** and those who collaborate in wickedness, following biblical imperatives such as 1 Cor. 5:9-13. If one does not do this, the taint of wickedness will spread like yeast through the whole loaf (i.e. the whole community), corrupting all that it encounters. See Aug.'s resp. in *On Bapt.*, p. 39.

In this respect wicked **clergy** are a peculiar danger to the community. **Any church leaders who collaborate with a wicked person** who by his word or actions has forsaken the faith **have compromised themselves and become tainted by his sins, thus losing their authority and being disqualified from the office they hold.** It is therefore important to make sure that one has not been ordained by anyone who has compromised the faith by sacrifice or collaborated with persecutors by handing over the Scriptures, lest one should share in the taint of their sin and guilt. **The sacramental ministry of those clergy who are thus tainted is worthless and they can only transmit this guilt and stain to the laypeople to whom they minister:** the polluted cannot purify, the soiled cannot launder (i.e. pronounce the absolution of others' sins) and the faithless cannot impart faith. See *CCC* p. 222; *Answer to Petilian*, p. 390-392, 234

The solution then is to avoid corruption and complicity in sin by joining and being baptized and ordained in the church of the confessors and martyrs that is pure and holy, without spot or wrinkle. (See *Ans. Petil.* p. 448 on rigorism.) Forget the easy grace, penance and restoration of the Catholic churches and those who attend them; let the dead bury their dead. If, however, **Catholics** do come over to the one true (Donatist) Church, treat them like people who enter the Church from heretical groups where the true (trinitarian) faith is not preached and baptize them again (**since their baptism was as false/invalid as the community into which they were originally baptized**).

Furthermore, **what makes a Donatist priest special is that he has a martyr's commitment** firmly and fiercely **to uphold and live out the pure faith of the one true Church.** This clear conscience, in contrast with the soiled, guilty conscience of the Catholic priest, **allows the Donatist priest to absolve sins and minister the sacraments**

in accordance with Christ's command. See *CCC*, p. 222; *Ans. Petil.*, I.2. ; p. 232-233. The good reputations of such persons committed to living and ministering within a religiously serious community is sufficient cause for the laity to entrust themselves to them and seek absolution and the administration of the sacraments from them. See *Ans. Petil.*, p. 234.

Augustine's Response to Donatist Views of the Church's Ministry and Sacraments

Augustine thought all this was profoundly mistaken. **It is Christ, not the minister, who truly presides at the sacraments, granting by grace both faith and forgiveness.** The subjective consciousness of the minister (guilty?) does not invalidate the sacraments, nor even does a minister's evil life (although the wicked certainly ought to be punished and brought to repentance) (*On Bapt.*, p. 140; *Ans. Petil.*, 1.2, p. 471). It is the fact that absolution is pronounced in Christ's name that is important here; **Christ is the one who forgives sins**, not the minister who pronounces the absolution. (See *Ans. Petil.* 462, 236-237; it is interesting to note that the "root/tree" and "generation of vipers" proof-texts had previously been central in Manichaeism.) Cf. 1 Cor. 3:7: "Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." A person who trusts in the minister's reputation has therefore missed the whole point and is condemned to live in the anxiety that **scrupulous** people feel when faced with uncertainty. Since a minister's life and the details of his ordination remain hidden from us, we can never be sure whether the minister is a true minister and can validly absolve or administer the sacraments.

Furthermore, as long as this life lasts, Augustine argues, **the universal Church will always be a mixed bag** (the Church is always to be universal, see *Corr. Don.*, p. 432; the members of the church always request the forgiveness of sin in reciting the Lord's Prayer, see *Ans. Petil.*, p. 395; *Corr. Don.*, p. 510; compare *On Bapt.*, p. 94,97). **There will be both good people and hypocritical and wicked people mixed in together and who is who will often not be clearly discernible by human sight**, although God will sort all things out at the final judgment (cf. 1 Cor. 4:5; see also on the wheat and the tares in *Ans. Petil.*, 347). Note the way the community of believers is addressed in 1 Jn. 1:8: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us" (quoted in *Corr. Don.*, p. 510) (This helped to set up Augustine's later views about the universal extension of sin and its debilitating effects, even on those who appear to live faultlessly.; see e.g. *Corr. Don.*, p. 511).

The struggle against evil is therefore strictly necessary, but it is not a warfare of flesh and blood directed against other people whom one supposes to have been denied grace; rather, it is rather a struggle that one must conduct inwardly through the candid examination of one's own heart and motives (self-examination).

To the extent that the struggle against evil carries over into the public sphere, it involves neither trying to predict who will or will not be found acceptable in the judgment. Instead one should be concerned to publicly present the Word of God through

- preaching that is adapted to the level of one's hearers and
- offering baptism and the Lord's Supper (as a visible, tangible presentation of the Word)

to strengthen faith (even weak faith) and to extend the consolation of the Gospel to those who struggle, are anxious and grieve. This shows the positive role that the outward action

of the institutional church can play in conveying divine love, truth and life to the soul, even when so much of the working of God (and even the working of the human heart) remains hidden from us and obscure to us.

Even admonition, when motivated by and exercised with charity can be a means by which the outward action of the Church can lead us to the truth about ourselves and, through repentance, to growth in faith.

- On the relation between the holiness of the Church and the sinfulness of its members and the implications this has for reframing our views of ministry, pastoral care and the Christian life, see the interesting study of
 - Cardinal Giacomo Biffi, *Casta meretrix—The “Chaste Whore” : An Essay on the Ecclesiology of St. Ambrose*, tr. Richard J.S. Brown (London: The St. Austin Press, 2000) (ISBN 1-901157-34-2; orders: books@saintaustin.org ; <http://www.saintaustin.org>)
- On early Christian views of the communion of saints and the consequent need for visible unity in the Church, the following older work is still worth reading:
 - J.P. Kirsch, *The Doctrine of the Communion of Saints in the Ancient Church: A Study of in the History of Dogma*, tr. John R. M’Kee (n.d.; repr. by Eastern Orthodox Books, P.O. Box 302, Willits, CA 95490), pp. 156-176, 183

The mixed character of the Donatist movement (compromising the holiness they claim for themselves) can be discerned by their alliance with the Circumcellions (*CCC*, pp. 225, 227-228) who are violent, unsavory characters (terrorists) and accepted them without forcing them to undergo rebaptism or penance (thereby implicitly recognizing them as members in good standing of the Donatist church). See *CCC*, p. 217. Furthermore even some of their bishops are a bad lot (idem on Primian).

Finally, even what the Donatists have does not profit them **since they lack love (charity), their ministry is presently unprofitable and will continue to be such as long as they remain in schism** (having departed from the universal Church and broken communion with it). See *CCC*, p. 218-219; *On Baptism*, pp. 1-2; *Corr. Don.*, p. 519. The lack of charity shown in their presumption of rebaptizing (*On Baptism*, pp. 3, 14-15).

- Thus, even the baptism of Christ cannot benefit those who would separate themselves from his Body by lack of love (see *On Baptism*, p. 69).
- Baptism was intended to mark inclusion into the universal Church, not departure into a sect that neglects and repudiates communion with other churches, cutting themselves off from the vitality of the broader Body of Christ and from the Spirit of love which animates it.
- To leave the communion of the Church because it contains some bad people is a short sighted sin against love, because it causes one to overlook the presence of many good people and to leave them behind and break communion with them too.

Since it was impossible to reason with such people, Augustine eventually came to feel that public debates would be ineffective and it was just and right to request forceful intervention by the state. Only when one has been separated from the deviant cult or sect can one gain the distance necessary to look back and recognize this separation as a good

thing (note here Augustine's paternalism, based in part on the necessity of compulsion for education). See *CCC*, 219-221, 226-227. On the other hand, persecuting people whose view of their identity and status depends upon being persecuted is a bit like throwing gasoline on a fire. See *CCC*, p. 223-224.

Position on baptism/salvation of infants and conversion in *On Bapt*, pp. 112-113 is incidentally interesting.