

Introduction to Augustine's Life and Works

Background: North African Christianity

Numidia and Its Restless Berbers

There is no way to understand the context of Augustine's life and ministry unless one first understands the peculiar characteristics of North African rural Christianity. Rural North Africa (Numidia) 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 extended family groups in villages in a somewhat mountainous area. They made a living by engaging in subsistence agriculture and producing olive oil for export. The primary language spoken appears not to have been Latin but rather various ancient Berber dialects; literacy was fairly minimal and confined to personal names and topographical names on road markers, all written in ancient Berber script (see Peter T. Daniels and William Bright, *The World's Writing Systems*, New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1996, 114-116 for examples).

These rural North Africans had a keen sense of independence from Roman central authority and made periodic displays of cultural and military resistance, attitudes which profoundly shaped the subsequent development of North African Christianity.

The Mediterranean Coastline: The Punic and Roman Influences

The Mediterranean coastline had been settled by the Phoenicians as early as the 11th century B.C. The Phoenicians were for many centuries the dominant merchant class, plying the Mediterranean in ships and trading goods between different kingdoms and empires, becoming rich and carving out a kingdom for themselves on the coastlines of North Africa (modern Algeria and Tunisia). Eventually they lost a series of three bloody wars (264-146 B.C.) with the emerging Roman Empire, becoming subject to the latter and intermarrying with Roman noble families.

Establishment of Christianity in Latin-Speaking North Africa

- Christian communities already existed throughout North Africa in the second half of the second century A.D. The Bible was probably already being translated into Latin in the 160's. (Although at this time the educated and those involved in commerce could often read Greek, this Latin translation made the Bible more accessible to all who were literate.)
- The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs describe the arrest and execution of Christians at Scillium and Madaurus (in Numidia=modern Algeria) during the 180's.
- Christianity was particularly prominent at Carthage (on the Mediterranean coast in modern Tunisia)
 - Hermogenes (Christian Platonist writer remembered for his interpretation of the creation account in Genesis and of the Psalms; active 200)
 - Tertullian (b. 150-160; active c. 200 as a teaching elder and apologist; expressed sympathy for Montanism in his later years)
 - Cyprian (bishop of Carthage 248-257, martyred in 258; remembered for his work on the unity and peace of the church [*De catholicae ecclesiae unitate*] and his exposition of the Lord's Prayer)

Persecution and the Division of the Church in the Fourth Century into Donatist and Catholic Factions

In the mid-third century persecution under Diocletian, the proconsul of Africa, Anullinus, had gone beyond the letter of the edict to go after not only the clergy but also the laity. 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. (Little churches scattered throughout the countryside were dedicated to the martyrs, had the martyr's relics interred under the altar, and the devoted faithful hoped after their death to be interred in the church near the martyr.)

When another major persecution was launched under Licinius at the beginning of the fourth century (303-304), all those clergy/bishops who handed over the Scriptures for destruction were designated *traditores* and all those 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).

- See examples of these *libelli* (certificates given to those who had sacrificed) in Stevenson/Frend, *A New Eusebius*, pp. 214-215.

What should be done with Christians who had fallen away from the faith and sacrificed? Furthermore, what should be done with clergy who had handed over the Scriptures (the *traditores*)? Were such persons still part of the Church? If not (since they had fallen away from the faith), when they sought to return to the Church should they be rebaptized?

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.

- 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?
 - ♣ 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?

There were also non-theological political questions about rival persons. The bishop Secundus 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 (also named Secundus) and most of the Numidian bishops. (Secundus the bishop and Lucilla claimed that one of the bishops who had ordained Caecilian was a *traditor* and therefore themselves named a reader at Carthage, Majorinus, to be the primate of Carthage, opposing Caecilian.)

Things 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: Since the church was split into two different and opposing factions, 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 and cannot 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 Donatus of Cassae Nigrae (who had replaced Majorinus as Donatist bishop of Carthage) was condemned for rebaptizing clergy who had lapsed under persecution. Imperial action against the Donatists provoked a reaction which strengthened their position, so that they were a potent force (perhaps even a majority) in many areas of rural North Africa (even in and around Hippo, where Augustine was bishop).

Augustine's Family and Childhood

Augustine was born Nov. 13, 354 in Thagaste (now Souk Ahras, Algeria), a town which had been founded in the second or third century A.D. His parents were Roman citizens of modest means financially but socially above the class called the *humiliores* (those of lower rank). His father Patricius thus owned property but did not have to do manual labor himself and served for a period of time as *curialis* (town counselor). We know that Patricius was not a Christian and it is likely that Patricius had not grown up in a Christian family, since Patricius' mother is also known not to have been a Christian. Augustine's mother Monnica, by contrast, had grown up in a family that was Christian and devoted to the Catholic Church (which was a small minority in this region in which

the Donatists dominated). Augustine had a brother Navigius, a sister whose name is not known and possibly other siblings as well. Patricius allowed Monnica to raise the children as Christians even though he was initially against this.

Augustine was sent (though this was a financial strain) to Madauros (Mdaorouch) a small town about 25 km. (15 miles) away from Thagaste, which was best known as the hometown of the Latin writer Apuleius (2nd century A.D.). Madauros, which had been founded in the third century first by Numidians and then by Roman veterans settled under imperial patronage, had become a minor intellectual center. Augustine would have studied Latin language and literature there from 366-369, i.e. from when he was 12 until when he was 15 or 16 years old.

Augustine was recalled home at 16. Since his father died within the next eighteen months, Augustine's return home may have been due to his father's illness or financial problems related to this. In this year at home, Augustine got into trouble with other children from minor aristocratic backgrounds and lived a dissipated life. He was obsessed with theatrical shows, the shows being rather bawdy and obscene and actors living a rather profligate lifestyle. (In *Confessions* II.4.9, Augustine also recalls how self-assertion led him to will in opposition to the divine law, stealing "simply to enjoy the theft for its own sake...we derived pleasure from the deed because it was forbidden.") Monnica became deeply concerned about Augustine and pleaded with him to avoid relationships with married women (his father may also have had a number of extra-marital sexual affairs), but refused to arrange a marriage for him, hoping he would instead become an academic success and secure a reputation as top teacher of rhetoric and oratory.

Romanianus, who was a relative of Augustine and also related to one of Augustine's more reputable friends, Alypius, made it possible for Augustine to study at Carthage, a large city on the Mediterranean coast in what is now modern Tunisia. Carthage helped supply Rome with grain and was wealthy enough to support many teachers of the liberal arts and had a cosmopolitan city life. Augustine appears to have gone to Carthage in late fall 370, when he was 16 or 17 years old. He describes himself at that time as "enamored with the idea of love...In love with loving, I was casting about for something to love,...I was inwardly starved of that food which is yourself, O my God" (*Confessions* III.1.1). Shortly after arriving at Carthage, he took a mistress (concubinage was a very common practice in the Roman Empire, even among nominal Christians, and had a recognized legal status). In the next year Augustine's father died and Augustine's son Adeodatus was born.

At about this time Augustine also became a Manichaean and also encouraged some of his friends and relatives, including Alypius and Romanianus, to become Manichaeans, believing their religion to be more intellectually sophisticated than the rural North African Catholic Christianity he had grown up with.

Then 18, Augustine also became fascinated with the works of the Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero (106-43 B.C.), whose *Hortensius* led Augustine to desire a higher life (*Confessions* III.4.7). Initially, this took the form of reading popular skeptical Platonism, later the writings of the Neoplatonist philosophers Plotinus and Porphyry.

Augustine earned a living by teaching rhetoric (eloquent and persuasive speaking) to young men from wealthy families.

- (Relatively few people were literate (2-4%). After learning one's letters, one studied literature, speeches and basic literary criticism (*grammatica*), then learned to produce speeches of one's own (*rhetorica / rhetorice*).

Augustine initially taught back in his hometown of Thagaste (372-376, when he was 19-23). Augustine's questionable lifestyle led to a breakdown in his relationship with his mother, who threw him out of the house but was willing later to reconcile with him. The death of a close friend (374) shook Augustine deeply (*Confessions* IV.4.7) but did not deter him from his ambition to advance into a superior teaching position, leading him to move back to Carthage (376) to teach rhetoric, then to Rome, afterwards receiving a government-funded position teaching rhetoric at Milan.

While in Milan, he attended the sermons of the local bishop, Ambrose, having become disillusioned with the materialism of the Manichaean sect and their inability to produce intellectuals who could answer Augustine's questions. (Among other things, Augustine noted that when one tries to imagine what God is like, one must imagine refined matter spread out in space; yet when bodily attributes are removed from this picture, it becomes impossible to imagine anything (any forms) with the physical senses, showing why a different kind of perception--i.e. a spiritual vision which transcends the material realm--is needed. This showed Augustine that Manichaeism, which gave a materialistic account of God, was unsatisfactory, but that Ambrose's account of Christian Platonism might be right.)

Augustine found a real commitment to the higher life in Ambrose and found that Ambrose could present the Gospel in a way that revealed it to be the highest and truest philosophy to which a soul could aspire. Augustine became a catechumen (*Confessions* V.14.25) and his mother, believing Augustine had finally risen to an appropriate position and was ready for a more settled life, arranged a marriage for him.

Christianity, however, had become an all or nothing commitment to Augustine, which is why he hesitated to take the final step and consistently embrace the faith.

- See *Confessions* VIII.11.28-30 (the garden scene), where the love for God must supersede all earthly loves and commitments.
- Cf. also VII.18.24: Ascent and progress are impossible apart From Christ's work as Mediator. Sinners must be brought to recognize their weakness, be healed of pride by Christ's humility, and renewed in love (charity).

Augustine and his mother and his friends retired to a villa outside Milan at Cassiciacum to reflect together upon the meaning of this new Christian commitment and Augustine and others of this group were subsequently baptized at Easter in 387. As Augustine and Monnica were waiting for a ship so that they could return to North Africa, Monnica died.

Augustine, upon returning to Thagaste, joined with some like-minded friends in forming a community of prayer and a shared commitment to an ascetic life of prayer. On a visit to the town of Hippo c.391, about 150 miles from Thagaste, Augustine was forcibly ordained by the local populace and served as an assistant to the elderly, infirm, Greek-speaking bishop Valerius. Augustine did a substantial part of the teaching and assumed a great many responsibilities that Valerius was no longer able to handle. He also formed a monastic community dedicated to prayer and ascetic discipline. When Valerius

died (395-396), Augustine was made bishop and lived in a community of prayer with the clergy attached to the episcopal residence. The church had an interest in substantial property (farms, inheritances, monasteries, funds for the care of the poor, etc.), which meant that Augustine had extensive responsibilities for administration and oversight and the handling of many legal questions (both those arising from the church's holdings and from cases brought to him by local citizens for adjudication.). He felt these administrative responsibilities to be a crushing burden (*sarcina*). He died c. 430 as the Vandals were approaching, laying waste the countryside.

Works

Besides catechetical works (such as the *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*, which we will read later in the course) and many sermons, many of Augustine's works addressed controversial questions which, in different ways, cut to the heart of what it means to be a Christian:

--Anti-Manichaean works:

- *Why does evil exist?
- *What is evil and how does it arise?
- *How are God and God's purposes and providence related to the evils that we suffer?

--Anti-Donatist works:

- *Who belongs to the Church?
- *How broad and comprehensive is the Church? Who is excluded and why?
- *What does it mean to be holy and what happens when holiness and obedience are wanting in the life of a professing Christian?
- *What should pastoral care look like and what should one's expectations be in extending pastoral care?
- *How are church and state related?

--Anti-Pelagian works:

- *How are human freedom and human effort related to the divine grace that comes before these?
- *What degree of perfection is possible in this life and by what means can it be obtained?
- *Why is baptism administered and how is it related to the forgiveness of sins and progress toward perfection?