The Donatist Controversy I

Published in the United States by New City Press
202 Comforter Blvd., Hyde Park, New York 12538

The Donatist Controversy I
Library of Congress Control Number: 2018960043

Augustine, Saint, Bishop of Hippo.
The works of Saint Augustine.
"Augustinian Heritage Institute"

ISBN 978-1-56548-404-7 (hardcover)
ISBN 978-1-56548-631-7 (e-book)

Printed in the United States of America

The Donatist Controversy I

Psalm against the Party of Donatus
(Psalmus contra partem Donati)

Answer to the Writings of Petilian
(*Contra litteras Petiliani*)

Answer to the Letter of Parmenian
(*Contra epistulam Parmeniani*)

Baptism
(*De baptismo*)

Letter to Catholics on the Sect of the Donatists
(*Epistula ad Catholicos de secta Donatistarum*)

general introduction and other introductions
by
+ Maureen Tilley

translations and notes
by
+ Maureen Tilley and Boniface Ramsey

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New City Press
Hyde Park, New York

THE WORKS OF SAINT AUGUSTINE
A Translation for the 21st Century

Part I - Books
Volume 21: The Donatist Controversy I

Sacred
to the memory of
Maureen Tilley

and in gratitude to the monks of
The Charterhouse of the Transfiguration
in Arlington, Vermont

Contents

General Introduction

The Anti-Donatist Works of Saint Augustine

Although Augustine was born in North Africa and Donatism was the major form of Christianity in Africa at the time, he had little contact in his early years with the main participants in and the issues of the Catholic-Donatist controversy.[1] In his youth he had been repulsed by a literal reading of the Latin translations of scriptural texts circulating in Africa, which seemed so much less refined than the literature he had read as a rhetorician in training.[2] Consequently, his serious interest in Christianity did not surface until his time in Milan in the late 380s. When Augustine converted, it was to a less literal and more philosophical form of Christianity than he knew from North Africa. It was one that might allegorize difficult scriptural passages in the same way that Neoplatonic philosophers allegorized classical religious texts.

Once he returned to Africa from his years in Italy and was ordained to the presbyterate in 391, Augustine's pastoral duties demanded that he learn more about Scripture and about the history of the split between Donatist and Catholic Christians, which he had not encountered in Rome, where he had gone to teach the classics of Latin literature, or Milan, where he was the court rhetorician. From the beginning of his presbyterate to the end of his life Augustine would be battling the Donatists in letters, treatises, sermons and debates. The present volume, the first of two, contains his treatises from the initial phase of his campaign. This phase begins with his earliest years as a presbyter and his first anti-Donatist tract, written in 393, the *Psalm against the Party of Donatus*. It extends through the early 390s, when Catholics and Donatists still maintained a

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1. On the history of the Donatist controversy see W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford 1952; reprinted 1970). Likewise consult Maureen A. Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: The Donatist World* (Minneapolis 1997); eadem, *Donatist Martyr Stories: The Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa = Texts in Translation for Historians* 24 (Liverpool 1996).
2. See *Confessions* III,5,9.

relatively peaceful modus vivendi, with churches of both parties in many cities. It ends in the years 401-403, when that modus vivendi broke down and both sides were writing furiously against each other, spurred on by a new generation of more dogmatic leaders.

In order to understand Augustine's writings against the Donatists, it is useful to rehearse the history of the schism. The Donatist movement represented the historic character of North African Christianity, a community with clearly marked boundaries and a strong sense of its own communal righteousness, guaranteed by its fidelity to Scripture, to the theology of Cyprian of Carthage (248-258), and to the memory of the numerous martyrs that North Africa had produced.

The remote beginnings of the split between the two Christian communities can be traced to the time of the persecutions of the emperors Decius and Valerian in the mid-third century, and from there to the persecution of Diocletian at the beginning of the fourth century. During the earlier of these persecutions, Christian places of worship were razed, the Scriptures were burned, wealthy adherents lost their honorable status, and clergy were required to offer sacrifice to the emperor's divinity. Cyprian had to administer his diocese and encourage his flock through letters sent from his exile in the countryside outside Carthage.

During the first wave of persecution under Decius (250-251), numerous Christians in Carthage, including some of the clergy, apostatized. Afterwards many laity and clergy repented of their betrayal and sought reconciliation with the Church. During the persecution, in the absence of the bishop, there was a variety of methods of reconciliation. Some penitents were received back into the fold by presbyters. Some enlisted the favor of confessors, men and women who had confessed their faith to the authorities and were suffering in prison, who might intercede for them with the clergy or directly with God. Still others waited for the return of the bishop. When Cyprian came back from his self-imposed exile, he and his clergy needed to devise a standard method of reincorporation for those who had betrayed the Church by sacrificing or even, in order both to escape punishment and to avoid actually offering sacrifice, by fraudulently obtaining certificates (known as *libelli*) that attested to their having sacrificed. The penance for these acts of betrayal was to be long and arduous and might extend to one's deathbed.

The method of incorporation of these persons was conditioned by the self-image of the Christian community as one with clear boundaries.

The bishops of North Africa assembled in Carthage in 256 and took their cue for reincorporation from a regional council held a generation earlier under the Carthaginian bishop Agrippinus (c. 220). When Agrippinus and his colleagues considered the plea of those coming to the Church from heretical groups, they rejected the baptism previously received by the heretics as no baptism at all and required them to be rebaptized as their rite of entrance into the true Church.

A similarly clear boundary separated apostatized Christians from the true Church. If true baptism was not to be found among heretics, neither could it be found among those baptized by apostates. Those baptized by apostate clergy needed to be rebaptized when they joined the true Church.

As the second wave of persecution loomed under the emperor Valerian (257-260), penitential practice softened so that as many penitents as possible could be brought back into the fold and have the consolation and strength of the eucharist as they faced a new test of their faith.

The pneumatology connected to this North African baptismal theology was based on a literal understanding of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. If the power of baptism was the power of the Holy Spirit, and if that Spirit was transmitted in baptism by the baptizing minister, and if, according to Wis 1:5, the Spirit flees deceit, then a person who was not a member of the Church could not truly administer baptism. Cyprian—whose courageous leadership, theological acumen, and martyrdom gave his writings an authority second to that of Scripture itself—summed this up in his Letter 69,11, where he made it clear that one could not give what one did not have. Similarly, one ordained by an apostate would not be validly ordained. In fact, no sacrament administered by an apostate or heretic or schismatic would be considered valid.

Following the persecutions of Decius and Valerian, many Christians in North Africa, Rome and Asia Minor held a rigorist position on the reincorporation of apostates, which called for a long and harsh penance for validly baptized Christians and rebaptism for those who had been baptized by apostates. The same rigorist stance reappeared after the persecution of Diocletian both at Rome and in North Africa, where apostates included not only those who sacrificed but also those who handed over copies of Scripture to the Roman authorities. These persons were called *traditores*—traitors or betrayers—because of their *traditio*—handing

over or betrayal—of the sacred texts.[3] North African Christianity in the fourth century, however, had several characteristics that marked it out as unique among the groups dealing with the reconciliation of penitent apostates.

First there were the clergy, divided into traditionalist and progressive wings, in Carthage and elsewhere. After a persecution the clergy had to assemble to elect and consecrate new bishops in place of those who had died during the persecution. Traditionalists, following the theology of Cyprian, asserted that one criterion for being bishop was not having been a *traditor,* and another was having being ordained by bishops who had not been *traditores*. In their way of thinking, any taint of guilt would invalidate not only the ordination of the new bishop but also the sacramental acts that he performed. Progressives, on the other hand, realized the impracticality of demanding such a high standard, and they did not accept the idea that maintaining this standard was necessary for the ordination of new clergy. They were also concerned about whether other sins would disqualify an ordaining bishop. A notable example of the debate among clergy on this point is enshrined in Augustine's citation of part of the heated discussion that occurred at the Council of Cirta, held in 305, which appears in his *Answer to Cresconius* III,27,30. The upshot of Cirta was the agreement that bishops who had been *traditores* and even murderers were forgiven and could exercise their episcopal functions.

Complicating the issue of unblemished clergy were rivalries among the clergy at Carthage, the premier see in Africa. During the persecution of Diocletian the Carthaginian clergy, led by Bishop Mensurius, seem to have walked a fine line between remaining loyal to their own Christian faith and discouraging their faithful from seeking martyrdom. At the time a certain Caecilian was the archdeacon of the Carthaginian church, who was reported to have kept Christians from providing food for imprisoned confessors. Regardless of the truth of this report, Caecilian's later election in 311 as bishop created a substantial division in the Christian community. In addition to Caecilian's reputation for being disrespectful to the confessors, one of his episcopal consecrators, Felix of Abthungi, was accused of having been a *traditor*. Then, his ordination was considered irregular because, contrary to custom, it was not validated by the

3. Whenever these terms—*traditor* (singular), *traditores* (plural) and *traditio*—appear in the Latin edition, they have been maintained in the translations.

presence of the primate of Numidia, the senior bishop of North Africa. By 311 the community had split, one faction supporting Caecilian and the other supporting his rival Majorinus. For their part, supporters of Caecilian complained that Majorinus was a puppet of a local moneyed woman named Lucilla, who had gotten on the wrong side of Caecilian by kissing relics she held before receiving the eucharist. They also spread the word that Lucilla had bought the election.

The implementation of imperial policy added to the complexity of the situation in the North African Church. Once Constantine recognized Christianity as a legal religion in 313, he provided benefits to Christian clergy similar to those offered to the priests of other governmentally recognized cults. In the case of North Africa, the delivery of funds was complicated by the existence of two rival lines of bishops, one Catholic and the other Donatist, not only at Carthage but elsewhere in Africa as well. Both sides appealed to Constantine for recognition as the true Church, the one to which official recognition and official funds would be accorded. Three times imperially initiated judicial processes recognized Caecilian as innocent of charges that would have invalidated his election—first, on an appeal directly to the imperial court; next, as the result of an investigation by a group of bishops appointed by Constantine and led by Miltiades, the bishop of Rome, in 313; and finally, by a commission of bishops from Italy and Gaul who met at Arles in 314, which Augustine often cites as a conclusive and—stretching the evidence—universal council. When Constantine grew tired of the African dispute, he took up his role as guarantor of religious peace and in 317 began to suppress the dissenters. By this time Majorinus had died and was replaced by Donatus, who ruled until 347; his strong leadership over more than three decades eventually caused his faction to be referred to by his name.

By 321 Constantine realized that no headway was being made in the settlement of what had become a full-blown schism, so he left the Africans to their own devices and turned his attention to more pressing political issues. A quarter-century later, in 346-348, his sons attempted to resolve the tensions in North Africa. Their efforts at support for the Catholics and a military campaign against the Donatists were overseen by the imperial notaries Paul and Macarius. (From this time of persecution come the stories of Donatist martyrs, the best known of which was the *Passion of Marculus*, which told of a Donatist bishop who had either jumped off a cliff or been pushed off one. The bishop's memory

and grave site became rallying points for the Donatists.) Eventually the emperor Constans, one of Constantine's sons, arbitrarily declared the campaign successful and withdrew his troops, despite the intransigence of the Donatists. Gratus, the Catholic bishop of Carthage, called a council and proclaimed unity too.

Donatists and Catholics lived side by side until the reign of Julian (361-363), often referred to as "the Apostate" for having abandoned the faith in which he had been baptized and having embraced traditional Greco-Roman religion. For various reasons, including personal antipathy towards orthodox Christianity, he favored the Donatists. After Julian's reign Catholics ramped up their efforts to regain imperial favor, and the emperors promulgated laws against rebaptism, though there seems to have been little enforcement except during periods when the Donatists allied with leaders of native political rebellions.

For a time the irenic bishop Parmenian of Carthage (c. 350-358; 361-391/2) was leading the Donatists, and he attempted to condition Donatist theology so that what mattered was not the spiritual state of the minister of the sacrament but his ecclesial affiliation. For his part, Genethlius, the Catholic bishop of Carthage (374-391), was a man dedicated to keeping the peace. Beginning in the 390s, however, the leadership of both parties changed. The two men who inclined toward peace died and were replaced by younger men dedicated to the causes of their respective churches. Parmenian's mantle fell on the controversialist Petilian of Cirta/Constantine (fl. 395-411). Genethlius's successor as Catholic bishop of Carthage was a reformer named Aurelius (391/2-430). He was part of a new generation of Catholics who were much more enthusiastic about maintaining Catholic doctrine, even if it meant active opposition to and by the Donatists. Along with Augustine himself and Augustine's childhood friend Alypius, who became the bishop of Thagaste (394-c. 430), Aurelius was Donatism's greatest antagonist.

Meanwhile the Donatist movement had itself fragmented. The two main schismatic groups within Donatism were the Rogatists and the Maximianists. Little is known about the Rogatists, named for their bishop, Rogatus of Cartenna (fl. c. 360s), but they seem to have been the most traditionalist group among the Donatists. They held to the self-identity of the church of Cyprian. Adhering to the consensus of the council at Carthage in 256, they opposed the practice of Donatist bishops in Mauretania

who did not rebaptize persons coming to the Donatists from the Catholic fold. Following the tradition of the early North African church, they objected to recourse to civil authority, whether it was the Donatist appeal to Julian for the restoration of Donatist churches in the early 360s or the later Catholic appeals to the emperors to dispossess Donatists and enforce unity. Finally, unlike many of their other Donatist colleagues, they condemned the immoral conduct of the Circumcellions, migratory workers who sometimes, under the cover of fidelity to Donatist principles, engaged in mob violence, often attacking Catholics and at least occasionally attacking Donatists; they were even known to engage in suicidal practices, most notably by hurling themselves off cliffs.

The Maximianists split from the larger Donatist community beginning in 392. Maximian, after whom the movement was named, was a deacon in the church of Bishop Primian at Carthage. The genesis of their falling out is unknown, but two factors contributed to the acrimony of the split. Primian was a stern figure, unpopular with his clergy, while Maximian was a relative of the same Donatus after whom the movement was named. Primian rigged an ecclesiastical trial against his rival when Maximian was too sick to attend and had him excommunicated. Maximian's supporters included most if not all of the *seniores*, the lay leaders of the diocese who were responsible for church property and who provided a counterbalance to the power and prestige of the bishop. The *seniores* invited the North African bishops to a council which met probably late in 392 and condemned Primian, who failed to appear. By the time a council of bishops met in June 393 at Cebarsussa to resolve the issue, over one hundred bishops had sided with Maximian, and soon afterwards he was ordained bishop of Carthage in opposition to Primian, who still enjoyed some local and regional support. In April 394 the Donatists met at Bagai and this time vindicated Primian and excommunicated the Maximianists. (Major portions of documents from Cebarussa and especially from Bagai appear in Augustine's writings.) When the Maximianists soon after returned to the fold they were not rebaptized, contrary to Donatist doctrine, even if they had been baptized by Maximianist clergy schismatically separated from those who were loyal to Primian. Augustine was quick to highlight this inconsistency in Donatist practice, particularly since the Donatists gave no quarter in their demand that Catholics who wanted to become Donatists had to be rebaptized.

Adding to the Catholic-Donatist controversy was a series of rebellions led first by an African member of the Roman army, Firmus (372-375), who favored the Donatists, and then, while Augustine was bishop, by his brother Gildo (397-398). Gildo was supported by the powerful and outrageously immoral Donatist bishop Optatus of Thamugadi (388-398), who is often mentioned by Augustine as someone of whom the Donatists should have been ashamed. Because of Firmus's support of the Donatists, the alliance between Gildo and Optatus, and the predominance of Donatists in areas of more active rebellion like Numidia, Donatists were typecast as rebels against both imperial authority and Catholic orthodoxy.

As for Augustine, he was baptized at Milan in 387. He returned to Africa in 388 and in 391 was ordained to the presbyterate in Hippo. The city contained both Catholic and Donatist congregations, so he needed to make sense of the pastoral situation, which he was encountering seriously for the first time. His reading about and study of the Donatist controversy were heavily dependent on the writings of Optatus, the Catholic bishop of Milevis, who wrote six books against the Donatists in 366 or 367 and appended a final book in 384.[4] Optatus traced the history of the schism, attacked Parmenian's theology, and defended the Catholic stance on the unrepeatable nature of baptism, whether administered within or outside the Catholic Church; he inveighed against Circumcellion violence as well. Also at Augustine's disposal were civil and ecclesiastical records. Augustine read these texts and, based on them and on his personal experience, began to form his own sacramental theology and ecclesiology. (An aspect of this ecclesiology, and one well worth noting, is his way of referring frequently to the Catholic Church simply as *catholica*, without the addition of *ecclesia*, meaning "church.")

Besides the treatises specifically directed against the Donatists, Augustine addressed the controversy in other formats—in sermons, debates, and letters. The first of his anti-Donatist letters was Letter 23 to Maximian, the Donatist bishop of Siniti, in 392. Letters to and about Donatists continued to be written throughout his life. Many of his sermons addressed the Catholic-Donatist split, especially those on the Psalms and on the Gospel of John. In 393 Augustine wrote his earliest surviving

4. For the critical edition see Optatus of Milevis, *S. Optati Milevitani Libri VII*, in CSEL 26. There is an English translation in *Optatus: Against the Donatists,* ed. and trans. by Mark Edwards (Liverpool 1997).