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# Augustine on Donatism: Converting a Schism into an Heresy\*

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The end of persecutions and the every time closer alliance between the imperial power and the Church since Constantine I announced better times for Christian communities within the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, the period elapsed from the Edict of Milan (313) until the Conference of Carthage (411) was not peaceful for the Church of North Africa but an age of an unprecedented gravity characterized by constant religious struggles between Catholics and Donatists.

## 1. The schismatic condition of Donatism

In the early fourth century, the Donatist cause divided in two the Church of North Africa using as excuse a disciplinary discrepancy without theological basis. It is well known that the Donatists accused Cecilianus and the rest of the Catholics of maintaining the communion with some bishops *traditores*, notably Mensurius of Carthage and Felix of *Abthugni*. Despite the failed attempts made by the African episcopacy and Constantine I to restore religious unity, the conflict spread because of personal oppositions and especially of a concealed fight for control over the north-African *plebs* to such an extent that, under the Theodosian emperors, opposition between the two factions had become a true civil war which the sovereigns could not obviate. Certainly, we must add the close relation of interests of the Church and of the Roman State which resulted in the Edict of Thessalonica promulgated by Theodosius I (380).

It was this same emperor who, aiming to enforce the repression of heresy, who published a very strict law (June 15<sup>th</sup> 392) punishing heretical clergymen with a fine of ten pounds of gold. Likewise, Donatist bishops elude payment adducing that Donatism was not legally a heresy. Although all the previous attempts of conciliation with Donatists had turned out to be fruitless, at Theodosian times, legislation only punished the Donatists if they rebaptize – as evidenced in the case of Crispinus of *Calama* –, but do not castigate the simple

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adhesion to this schism. From the point of view of the followers of Donatus, their faith did not differ too much from that of their rivals for both had a common belief founded on the same Gospels, expressed through the same symbol and shared authentic Christian elements such as the Scriptures, the faith in Christ, the celebration of Easter, the sacraments, the recitation of psalms, the cult of saints, the episcopal ordination and the ecclesiastical ranks, *etc.* The question of these *vestigia ecclesiae* in Donatists' hands also interested the Roman State, for it could be regarded as being scrupulous condemning a sect with so many features in common with Catholicism. Besides, the Roman emperors could have considered very dangerous to condemn as heretical the whole Donatist practices, because this condemnation could also confuse the Christian Catholic *plebs*.

## 2. The pass from schism to heresy: the religious justification

In earlier Christian literature, the terms 'schism' and 'heresy' were used synonymously, although they did not have the same meaning: the former (schism) had connotations of 'rupture' of the ecclesiastic communion; the latter (heresy) of 'doctrinal error', that is, 'divergence of thought'. From a theological point of view, the distinction between schism and heresy was only slightly interesting since schismatics and heretics were both excluded from the true Church. It was not the same, however, on juridical grounds, which only criminalized heresy. So, from a legal point of view, only heresy was considered punishable.

If the Donatist schism had remained just a simple rupture of communion without more consequences, the Roman State would have shown some mercy, but the enlargement of the conflict and especially the violence exerted by *circumcelliones* and the alliance with the usurpers Firmus and Gildo finally convinced the Court of Ravenna of the necessity to promote the Donatist schism to the category of heresy: this was the only way to repress it with the toughness that the anti-heretical Theodosian legislation had established – or, at least, intimidated the recalcitrant heretics with the threat of the implementation of the punishments prescribed by laws.

Thus, through the last decade of fourth century, the main interest of the north-African Catholic Church has been to show to the emperors – certainly worried about the problems of coexistence among Catholics and Donatists in North Africa – the disciplinary and dogmatic rupture that Donatism entailed and to justified its change from being a schism to something worse, namely heresy. Aurelius, primate of Carthage, and Augustine, bishop of Hippo, were the theologians to assume this work. Some friends and collaborators of the Augustinian circle joined them: Alipius of *Thagaste*, Possidius of *Calama*, Evodius of *Uzali*, and so on. The whole group played a significant role in this process, whose first period ended with the Edict of Union (405), which

sanctioned the definition of heresy of Donatism and decreed the persecution of its faithful.

In order to demonstrate the fact of heresy, Augustine exposed theological and ecclesiological arguments at first: the non-canonical nature of rebaptism, the lack of universal communion, the sin of pride that has originated the elevation of altar against altar, the unusefulness of the sacraments offered out of the Church even if they were the same than the Catholic ones, *etc.* In parallel with the theological discussion, Augustine designed a strategy to fight Donatism based on historical grounds for, according to his opinion, the contemporary north-African *plebs* did not perceive the objective causes of the schism. Augustine attempted to save from oblivion and to make public the historical events which gave origin to the schism and how it has been condemned since its beginning. Neither did Augustine forget to denounce other more recent events which showed Donatists' vileness and cruelty: its treason crime towards the Roman State, the orgies in which the assemblies of Donatist faithfuls degenerated, the attacks of the *circumcelliones* on schismatic bishops passed to the Catholic Church, the reinstatement of the Maximianist without rebaptism, the denial of the Donatist hierarchy to discuss in public, *etc.* On the other hand, Aurelius of Carthage – as primate of the north-African Church – spared no effort to fight Donatism by means of summoning councils in which rebaptism and other Donatist practices – such as the cult of the Donatist martyrs at the false *memoria martyrum* – were condemned again and again.

Between 397 and 411, the involvement of Augustine in this controversy redounded, firstly, in many epistles *ad populum* and, then, in some historical treatises.<sup>1</sup> In *c. ep. Parm.* (400), he uses twenty-nine times the terms 'schism' and 'schismatic' regarding Donatists, while 'heresy' and 'heretic' appear only seven. On the contrary, ten years later, 'heresy' and 'heretic' are very much used to refer to Donatism and Donatists.<sup>2</sup> We find the justification of this thought in *Cresc.* (2, 3, 4; 2, 7, 9), where Augustine wrote that the Donatist heresy was 'a lasting schism, an increasing dissension'. It must be noted the similitude between the expression used by Augustine in this work (*schisma inueteratum*) and the sentence of the Edict of Union of 405 (*inueteratum*

<sup>1</sup> The anti-Donatist treatises written since 400 until 405 are the following: *c. ep. Parm.*; *bapt.*; *c. litt. Pet.*; *cath. fr.*; and *Cresc.* After the Conference of Cartaghe (411), Augustine will deal again with the anti-Donatist controversy, but he will only devote a letter to this affair (epistle 185). As regards the role of Aurelius and Augustin in the anti-Donatist polemic, see: P. Vanderlinden, *L'affaire Cécilien: Étude sur la méthode de Saint Augustin dans son argumentation anti-Donatiste* (Louvain, 1959), especially 106-71; Serge Lancel, *Saint Augustin* (Paris, 1999), 243-8 and 404-29; Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo. A Biography* (London, 2000), 183-239; Carlos García Mac Gaw, *Le problème du baptême dans le schisme donatiste* (Bordeaux, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Alberto Pincherle, *L'ecclesiologia nella controversia Donatista: Ricerche Religiose* 1 (1925), 35-55, specially 53, n. 3. Equally, Optatus of Milevi use schism (sixty times) rather than heresy (thirty-three times) to refer to the Donatists.

*malum*).<sup>3</sup> Although the publication of *Cresc.* has been dated few months later to the promulgation of the law, in my opinion, there is little doubt that these books should be written before February 405 and it would not be strange if Augustine himself had coined and offered this phrase to an imperial Court accustomed to entrust its bishops the task of defining dogma. Besides, it would be logical that the imperial constitution avoided using *schisma* – not legally punishable – and preferred *malum*, for the aim of every legislator is to eradicate evil.

Once bishops had proved beyond any doubt the heretical nature of Donatism, imperial power could then promulgate several edicts for its repression: prohibition of rituals, deprivation of fiscal privileges, confiscation of patrimonies and places of cult, and penalties for clergymen who assumed heresy. The first law to condemn Donatists as heretics dates from 405 and allowed Honorius to impose an Edict of Union.<sup>4</sup> Although certain historical circumstances urged the Court of Ravenna to temporarily suspend the Edict in the following years, this law was never formally abrogated and so led the way to the Conference of Carthage of 411, which meant the final defeat of Donatism from a legal point of view. However, in 411, the way developed was that of a contradictory assembly in which the imperial judge listened to Catholic and Donatist arguments and passed sentence.

### 3. The Donatism as a political and social problem

Undoubtedly, when the Roman State agreed to accept the heretical nature of Donatism, it was for political convenience. Since the times of Constantine I, the imperial policy regarding Donatism had varied according to several parameters: interventionism with an excess of violence, disgust towards the schismatics' obstination, momentary indifference when political conjunctures forced other priorities, *etc.* During this period, Donatists were very pleased to denounce the close alliance between the Catholic bishops and the Empire, which they considered a repressive state. Because of this, the schismatics declared eagerly their opposition to Roman emperors and, under Valentinian I, some Donatist bishops – called *Firmiani* – even sided with the usurper Firmus (c. 372-5). Although one must admit that the schismatic Church did not support the rebellion unanimously, the imperial Court realized for the first time how Donatism could surpass the religious range and commit a crime of treason to the State. Actually, accusations of disloyalty towards the Empire – the Catholic Empire, obviously – that Catholic bishops made against Donatists go back to the times of Optatus of Milevi, an author who reported the famous phrase of Donatus of Carthage

<sup>3</sup> *CTh.* XVI 6.4 (405).

<sup>4</sup> *CTh.* XVI 6.3 (405); XVI 6.4 (405) [= Edict of Union]; XVI 6.5 (405); XVI 5.38 (405).

(*Quid est imperatori cum ecclesia?*). And this disloyalty was also confirmed – in the Catholic eyes – when Donatists had appealed to Julian the Apostate and had obtained the return of the churches confiscated previously.

It is not strange then that the two first laws of *titulus* VI of book XVI against rebaptism<sup>5</sup> were published during this usurpation and the following years.<sup>6</sup> These laws are addressed to African officials, but the names of the Donatists are never indicated in the laws before 405. Besides, it is relevant that the major part of the *constitutiones* which condemn rebaptism do not place in *titulus* 5 of book XVI (*De haereticis*), but in an exceptional *titulus* 6 (*Ne sanctum baptismum iteretur*), in which the Edict of Union of 405 is published. Since the condemnation of Donatists as heretics, legislation which expressly mentions the Donatists move to *titulus* 5, and only two laws more will be published in *titulus* 6: one against Novatians's rebaptism and another against Eunomians'.

Later on, under Theodosius I, when imperial legislation began to allow persecution of heretics rigorously, the law of June 392 which punished heretical clergymen with a fine of ten pounds of gold tried to be applied against heretical bishops. However, as exposed, Donatists have not yet been legally qualified as heretics. This situation may explain the law of 395 which clarifies that anyone who has manifestly deviated from Catholic religion should be considered a heretic. This law, although vaguely, could refer to Donatists.

Under Honorius, dissidence among Donatist bishops presents again its more dangerous aspect when Optatus of *Thamugadi* and other schismatic bishops – *Gildonis satellites* – allied themselves with the usurper Gildo (397-8) and lead several attacks and violent actions. The lack of legal means appeared then clear, and the State did support and accept the assimilation of schismatics to heretics. This assimilation permitted the emperors to use religious legislation to persecute Donatists as political enemies and impose on to them the same treatment that the heretic had received since Theodosius I and the Edict of Thessalonica.

Moreover, violence of Donatists and *circumcelliones* against Catholic Church individuals and possessions multiplied, and Donatist bishops passed to the Catholic party also were a target of violent beatings. In 404, one of these bishops travelled to the Court of Ravenna to show the emperor his numerous injuries. There he met with the legates of the council assembled at Carthage on June 404 to obtain a more rigorous application of the laws promulgated against the heretics on the African schismatics.

<sup>5</sup> *CTh.* XVI 6.1 (373); XVI 6.2 (377); XVI 5.5 (379).

<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, taking into account that the beginning of Firmus' usurpation is not well dated – *PLRE* proposes 372/3 –, the Theodosian law – well dated on February 20<sup>th</sup> 373 – may be earlier and also the reason for which a little group of discontented Donatist bishop join the usurpation. In this sense, the purpose of this *constitutio* of Valentinian will not be to punish the supporters of Firmus' usurpation – which could not have started yet – but to clearly demonstrate that the period of protection of which the north-African Donatism enjoyed under Julian was now cancelled.

The imperial answer to this state of affairs was the Edict of Union of February 12<sup>th</sup> 405, by which Honorius ordered the restorement of religious unity in favour of the Catholics and declared by law the criminal condition of being Donatist. Then, Donatists were officially assimilated to heretics as guilty of the theological error of rebaptism.

Those were then the political causes which lead the Roman State to persecute the Donatists and to try to eliminate their presence within the frontiers of the Empire. What was no more than a disciplinary problem in the beginnings became a problem of state because of the violence of the *circumcelliones* and the alliance of some of the Donatist hierarchs with the north-African usurpers Firmus and Gildo. Well now, legislation before 405 did not deliberately allow to act against them and, on the other side, the Donatists did not recognize the Roman State the authority to legislate concerning questions of faith. Therefore, Catholic bishops had to elaborate a line of arguments which justified the legal punishment of Donatism as a heresy and for this to happen they put together theological reasonings, historical events and finally political and social aspects. Besides, for the Catholic African episcopacy, the goal of this struggle was not simply ecclesiastical peace, but also primacy on African Christian *plebs*.

Meanwhile, after 405 and although it will be definitively banned in the Conference of 411, Donatist bishops and faithful will resist in Africa until the coming of the Arabs in the seventh century. It is interesting to verify how, during the Vandalic domination, when the established power was not as eager as the Roman State in repressing Donatism, Quodvultdeus uses the terms 'schism' and 'heresy' again indistinctly to refer to the followers of Donatus.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *De promiss.* I 12.19.