

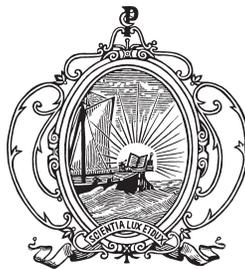
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The Letters *Ad Donatistas* of Augustine and their Relevance in the Anti-Donatist Controversy*

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to explain how, until the conference of Carthage in 411, Augustine granted great importance to the letters as a direct and quick manner to focus his communication and debate with Donatists. He wisely used the letter to address both the Donatist *plebs* and the aristocrats and the schismatic bishops. In his letters, Augustine displayed a very detailed sort of arguments (historical, scriptural, theological, *etc.*) to achieve that followers of Donatism apostate from their schismatic faith. In fact, Augustine anticipated in his letters the arguments that he will develop largely in his treaties. After the Conference of Carthage in 411, a new shift in Augustinian epistolary strategy arose. Besides interrupting his correspondence with the Donatist bishops – now legally heretics – he will address no further letter to the Donatists people with the only exception of the synodal letter 141 – read in 412 by Augustine on behalf of the Council of Zerta. From then on, Augustine did not use the epistolary format for the debate anymore, and he only used it in order to spread the verdict of condemnation of Donatism by Flavius Marcellinus.

As evidenced by the account of Augustine's ordination as a priest of Hippo, the local Catholic community was poor and barely subsisted due to the ineffectiveness of bishop Valerius. Augustine's skills as a speaker and as an advocate for the Catholic cause, moved the Catholics to convince him to accept his appointment to the church of Hippo. Shortly after this appointment, they promoted Augustine to the episcopal throne, even though this ordination contravened the canons of Nicaea. The Catholic community of Hippo felt so besieged by the Donatists that they preferred to violate the Nicene rules than to wait for the death of Valerius: they feared that in the meantime, Augustine could be promoted to another vacancy.

* This study is based on research developed within the «*Grup de Recerques en Antiquitat Tardana (GRAT)*», Grup de Recerca de Qualitat de la Generalitat de Catalunya, n° 2009SGR1255», and has been carried out with the help of Research Project HAR2010-15183, financed by the Ministerio de Ciencia y Tecnología. Web: <http://www.ub.es/grat/grat01.htm>. As regard the members and the research areas of the GRAT, see <http://www.ub.edu/grat/grat122.pdf>.

Therefore, it was by his excellence as a speaker and as a controversialist that Augustine was appointed to the see of Hippo. This fact explains why shortly after his ordination Augustine devoted himself to the debate with the Donatists.¹ As he explains in a well known passage of the *Contra litteras Petilianas*, when he arrived at Hippo the Donatist predominance over the Catholics was so strong that the local Donatist bishop, Faustinus, had forbidden cooking bread for Catholics.² So, in order to overturn this sort of 'state of emergency', Augustine developed a threefold strategy against the Donatists based on public discussion: first of all, discussion with the Donatist bishops, in order to intensify relations between the two communities; secondly, discussion with the local aristocrats who supported the Donatists, in order to show them their error when supporting the schism; and finally, discussion with the Donatist people, in order to reveal to them how their bishops cheated them.

To establish communication at these three levels, Augustine planned a strategy based on public discussion and more specifically, on a public debate where bishops of both parties were to address an audience of Catholic and Donatist people. Indeed, in 397 he managed to hold a public debate with Fortunius, the Donatist bishop of *Thubursicu Numidarum*, which finally failed due to its turbulent course.³ After this failure, it seems that no other Donatist bishop participated in any public debate.

At the same time, Augustine developed a strategy of epistolary discussion,⁴ which became his favourite way to engage in debate with the Donatists, yet they chose not to answer Augustine's requests. Thus, from the beginning, Augustine began a correspondence with bishops, laymen aristocrats and the Donatist *plebs* that sometimes proved successful and sometimes not. His literary activity in this regard was very noticeable between 392 and 405. Thus, in 400 Augustine prided himself on this activity: 'I have discussed on several occasions and on a huge variety of subjects against the Donatists, by word or by writing'.⁵ However, his letters and treatises attest several times that the

¹ As regards to Augustine and the Donatists, see William H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church. A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford, 1952), 227-99; Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo. A Biography* (London, 1967), 189-243 (revised edition: London, 2000, 183-239); André Mandouze, *Saint Augustin. L'aventure de la raison et de la grâce* (Paris, 1968), 331-90; Serge Lancel, *Saint Augustin* (Paris, 1999), 243-8, 404-29.

² Augustine, *c. litt. Pet.* 2.83.184. On Donatism in the Augustine's times, see Maureen A. Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa. The Donatist World* (Minneapolis, 1997).

³ Augustine, *ep.* 44.

⁴ On the epistolary activity of Augustine: Éric Rebillard, 'Augustin et le rituel épistolaire de l'élite sociale et culturelle de son temps', in Éric Rebillard and Claire Sotinel (eds), *L'évêque dans la cité du IV^e au VI^e siècle: image et autorité* (Rome, 1998), 127-52; see also Donatien De Bruyne, 'Notes sur les lettres de saint Augustin', *RHE* 23 (1927), 523-30; *id.*, 'Les destinataires des lettres de saint Augustin', *RBen* 44 (1932), 303-8; Maria P. Ciccacese, 'La tipologia delle lettere di S. Agostino', *Augustinianum* 11 (1971), 471-507.

⁵ Augustine, *c. ep. Parm.* 1.1.1.

Donatists seldom replied to his letters. Only Petilian seems to have sent letters to Augustine where he refuted the *Contra litteras Petiliani*.

Bishops

From the 24 letters addressed by Augustine to people linked to the Donatism, 12 were written to bishops (10 letters to 8 addressees)⁶ or priests (2 letters),⁷ but only 4 of them (letters 23, 33, 49, 51) actually responded to the desire to establish a public discussion about the *causa ecclesiae*. In letters 33 and 49 to Honoratus and Proculianus, Augustine suggests that since they refused to take part in a public debate, they could hold an epistolary discussion. As regards the terms of the discussion, Augustine suggested to focus it only on theological matters, leaving aside blame on the parties of the schism and questions such as the ‘Macarian times’ or the violence of the circumcellions.

That is why the first letters of Augustine focused on the refutation of rebaptism and insisted on the lack of universal communion of the Donatist Church. Shortly after, in letter 51 (to Crispinus) Augustine brings out the most transcendent argument in the controversy against Donatists: the Maximinian affaire.⁸ In this first phase of the controversy, the other main argument against Donatists was their limitation to Africa.⁹ Even though Donatists said to have a bishop in Rome and another one living at the home of a Hispanic woman¹⁰ – who should not be identified with Lucilla – these arguments were not enough to sustain that Donatists maintained universal communion with the transmarine Churches.

However, the epistolary discussion with bishops was interrupted soon after these four letters. Augustine argued that he had been forced to set aside this epistolary controversy for two reasons: firstly, because Donatist bishops were

⁶ *epp.* 23 (to Maximinus, bishop of *Castellum Sinitense*), 33 (to Proculianus, bishop of *Hippo Regius*), 49 (to Honoratus, bishop of an unknown see), 51 and 66 (to Crispinus, bishop of *Calama*), 87 (to Emeritus, bishop of *Caesarea*), 88 (to Ianuarius, bishop of *Casae Nigrae*), 93 (to Vincencius, bishop of *Cartennae*), 106 and 108 (to Macrobius, bishop of *Hippo Regius*).

⁷ *epp.* 142 (to Saturninus, Eufrates et *clericis*) and 173 (to Donatus, presbyter of *Mutugenna*).

⁸ Albert C. de Veer, ‘L’exploitation du schisme maximianiste par saint Augustin dans sa lutte contre le donatisme’, *RecAug* 3 (1965), 219-37.

⁹ On the theological basis of the controversy against Donatists see Émilien Lamirande, *La situation ecclésiologique des donatistes d’après saint Augustin* (Ottawa, 1972); and, also Alberto Pincherle, ‘L’ecclésiologia nell controversia donatista’, *Ricerche Religiose* 1 (1925), 35-55; Carlos G. García Mac Gaw, *Le problème du baptême dans le schisme donatiste* (Bordeaux and Paris, 2008); Matthew A. Gaumer, ‘Dealing with the Donatist Church: Augustine of Hippo’s nuanced claim to the authority of Cyprian of Carthage’, in Paul van Geest, Hans van Loon and Henk Bakker (eds), *Cyprian of Carthage: Studies in His Life, Language and Thought* (Leuven, 2010), 181-202; Jacques B. Nkoa Lebogo, *La querelle sur le baptême: les divisions de l’Église chrétienne africaine* (Paris, 2011).

¹⁰ Augustine, *c. litt. Pet.* 2.108.247.

used to exhibit these letters as if they were letters of communion and secondly, because they did not answer his letters and refused to participate in any public debate. In fact, in the *Contra Gaudentium*, Augustine states that Petilian complained about the dialogue form in which the book II of *Contra litteras Petilianian* was written.¹¹ There Augustine had decided to write *Petilianus dixit* before the quotation of the Petilian writings and to add *Augustinus respondit* before introducing his refutation. Petilian accused Augustine of being a liar because he wanted to make it seem that Petilian had accepted to engage in a public debate with Augustine, when in fact it never happened. The *Actae* of the Conference of Carthage of 411 also attest that Donatists were very reluctant to engage in contradictory dialogue with their Catholic opponents. That's why Augustine soon transferred the literary place for the persuasion of the Donatist bishops from letters to treatises. In these treatises he went on to refute texts that were not addressed to him, but came into his hands by many different ways.

However, after the publication of the edict of union of 405, the purpose of the correspondence with Donatist bishops changed:¹² In his six letters addressed to Donatist bishops after 405, Augustine doesn't want to persuade anymore, but only to justify the condemnation. Thus, in letter 87 addressed to Emeritus Augustine claims that Donatism was 'a schism that has become a heresy because of his stubbornness'.¹³ In order to justify such a statement, which allowed civil authorities to impose on Donatists harsh penalties contained in the imperial laws against heretics, Augustine now provided new arguments to the epistolary discussion, especially those of historical order that had been set aside in his previous letters to Donatist bishops. I refer, for instance, to the argument that the Catholic *traditio* was unproven or to the violence of Optatus of Thamugadi. But, above all, after the issue of the imperial edict of union, Augustine was forced to handle the thorny subject of why Donatist were 'persecuted' by law. Similarly, this is the plot of letters 88 (to Ianuarius of Casae Nigrae), 93 (to Vincentius of Cartennae) and 108 (to Macrobius of Hippo). As regards to letters 66 and 106, they are not related to the subject of this contribution since they contain only Augustine's complaints about specific actions of the two bishops to which these two letters are addressed.

In this second phase of the controversy against Donatists, Augustine brings up several times the question of the Maximinian schism. But it also becomes another very significant historical argument, namely that the Donatists were the first to appeal to the emperor Constantine for the condemnation of the Cecilianist party and that they did it again in the times of the emperor Julian, when they asked him for the return of their churches.

¹¹ *c. Gaud.* 1.1.

¹² On the Edict of Union of 405: François Martroye, 'La répression du donatisme et la politique religieuse de Constantin et de ses successeurs en Afrique', *MSAF* 73 (1914), 107-16.

¹³ Augustine, *ep.* 87.4.

Aristocrats

As regards laymen (aristocrats and plebeian), Augustine aimed to make them move over from the Donatist Church to the Catholic one. But Augustine was completely convinced that the theological speculations of his letters to bishops would not be understood by most of the Donatist followers. That's why he adapted his discourse to specific laymen audiences. Keeping them in mind, and still being a priest, he wrote the poem *Psalmus contra partem Donati*. In this work there are two verses that are repeated insistently: 'You, who love peace, judge now the truth' and 'altar against altar was raised [by the Donatists]'. Augustine has condensed in this poem all the historical and theological arguments he considered essential to highlight the dangerous mistake of remaining in the Donatist schism.

The main argument developed by Augustine in this poem is summarized in the phrase 'altar against altar was raised'. But surprisingly enough, such a graphic image of the schism was not very often used in his subsequent treatises, with the exception of those related to the Maximinian schism against Primianus of Carthage.¹⁴ It seems as if Augustine had thought that this visual metaphor could be dangerous for the Catholic propaganda because it could move illiterate people to presume a much bigger spread of Donatism in Africa. Furthermore, it could suggest an idea of parity between Donatists and Catholics that the latter did not want to transmit to his followers.

However, after writing this book Augustine realized that the origins of the schism were no longer remembered because of the time passed as well as of the lies spread by Donatist bishops. That is why, as Henri-Irénée Marrou said, Augustine was forced to become a historian.¹⁵ Augustine sent 8 letters to Donatist aristocrats:¹⁶ Eusebius, the group led by Glorius (and four others), Seuerinus, Celer and Naucellio. We may suppose that they all belonged to the senatorial establishment,¹⁷ since Augustine expressly states about some of them – like Eusebius or Celer – that they were *clarissimi uiri*. In all these few letters, historical information prevails over theological argumentations. The main point addressed there is the denunciation of the violence of Donatist followers.

¹⁴ 'Altar against altar' referred to Catholics and Donatists is not used later than 400 (in *Contra epistulam Parmeniani* and *De baptismo*).

¹⁵ '[...] la controverse Donatiste l'a amené à se faire lui-même historien, au sens moderne et scientifique du mot', Henri-Irénée Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* (Paris, 1938), 419. On the diversity of historical arguments of Augustine, see Pierre Vanderlinden, *L'affaire Cécilien. Étude sur la méthode de Saint Augustin dans son argumentation anti-Donatiste* (Louvain, 1959), 106-71. Most of the sources of the conflict have been convened by Jean-Louis Maier, *Le dossier du Donatisme*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1987-1989).

¹⁶ Eusebius (*ep.* 34-5), Glorius *et alii* (*ep.* 43-4), Seuerinus (*ep.* 52), Celer (*ep.* 56-7) and Naucellio (*ep.* 70). As regards to these Donatist personalities, see Elisabeth Paoli, 'Laïcs dans la correspondance d'Augustin', *Itinéraires Augustiniennes* 17 (1997), 8-13.

¹⁷ The existence of Donatist senators has been attested since Claude Lepelley's article published in 1990: 'Les sénateurs donatistes', *BSAF* 1990, 45-56.

Questions such as rebaptism and the lack of universal communion of the Donatist church are discussed at length only in one letter (*ep.* 52, to Seuerinus).

It is obvious that Augustine addressed correspondents of a relevant social position, because he was convinced that a humble person forced to choose between observing the dictates of a Catholic bishop or following the steps of his *dominus* inside a Donatist church, would probably prefer the second option. In this regard the case of Celer deserves attention. Augustine never met him personally, but he sent Celer some works against Donatists in order to attain his conversion as well as that of all his farmers.¹⁸ In fact, Augustine dreamed of Celer becoming a powerful ally, as was the *proconsul Africae* Pammachius when he pushed its *coloni* to reject Donatist faith.¹⁹

We might conclude from the very short chronological frame of his correspondence with the Donatist aristocrats (these letters are dated between 395 and 402) that Augustine found little echo among them. This can be inferred from the letter 35 of Augustine (to Eusebius), where we read that the previous letter sent to this relevant North African aristocrat (*ep.* 34) was not welcomed well.

Plebeian people

Since this literary approach to aristocrats failed, or perhaps seeking to spread more widely his letters, from 403 Augustine decided to stop addressing letters to individual laymen and addressed them straight to Donatists or, more specifically, to *plebes Donatistae*.²⁰ I refer to letters 76, 105 and 141, to which I think we should add letter 185 (commonly known as *De correctione Donatistarum*) although not explicitly addressed to Donatist plebeian people.

In the first of them (*ep.* 76), Augustine mixed in delicate balance, historical arguments (the judgments of Rome, Arles and Brescia on the case of Caecilian and the violence of Optatus and the circumcellions) with common theological matters (lack of universal communion and the Maximinian affair). Though Augustine also introduced here a new topic, not found in the other letters, but taken from Cyprian of Carthage: by following their bishop's teachings Donatist laymen placed their salvation at risk.²¹

¹⁸ Augustine, *epp.* 56-7.

¹⁹ *ep.* 58.1. On the relevance of the *domini* in the christianization of the countryside in the West, see Rita Lizzi Testa, 'L'Église, les *domini*, les païens *rustici*: quelques stratégies pour la christianisation de l'Occident (IV^e-VI^e siècle)', in Hervé Inglebert and Sylvain Destephen (eds), *Le problème de la christianisation du monde antique* (Paris, 2010), 77-113.

²⁰ In this regard, it should be noted that, on a large number of occasions, Augustine talks about the Donatists as he does about the Catholics: Alexander Evers, *Church, Cities, and People: A Study of the 'plebs' in the Church and Cities of Roman Africa in Late Antiquity* (Leuven, 2010), 240-9.

²¹ Cyprian, *ep.* 73.21; see also *ep.* 4.4.

The following letter (*ep.* 106) was issued after the edict of union of 405. A new significant change of purpose is noticeable here. The exhortative aim of letter 76 is replaced by a more accusatory line. Augustine displays a long list of Donatist violent acts that justify the repression of Donatists by the imperial law.²²

The third letter *ad plebes Donatistas* (*ep.* 141) was written shortly after the conference of Carthage in 411. It aims to clarify what had really happened in this contradictory gathering of Donatist and Catholic bishops in order to prevent Donatists cheating their followers about the development and outcome of the sessions.²³

Thus, it is as if each one of the three phases of the history of Donatism in Augustine's time had its own letter *ad plebes Donatistas* adapted to the objectives of each period of the controversy: exhortation in the first phase (before the edict of union of 405), justification (after conviction for heresy in the edict of union of 405) and explanation (after the verdict of the conference of 411).

After the Conference of Carthage in 411, a new shift in Augustinian epistolary strategy arises. Besides interrupting his correspondence with the Donatist bishops – now legally heretics – he does not address letters to the Donatist people anymore, with the only exception of letter 141 – read by Augustine in 412 on behalf of the Council of Zerta. From then on, Augustine did not use letters to continue the debate anymore: he only used them in order to announce the verdict of condemnation of Donatism by Flavius Marcellinus. Now, Augustine was mostly interested to avoid Donatist bishops spread biased and distorted reports among their followers.

Significance and limits of the Augustinian epistolary activity

From Augustine's letters to Donatists we might conclude that, despite Augustine's requests for a public or epistolary discussion, he failed to establish a fluent communication with his Donatist opponents. But, can we really assume

²² Augustine was not by nature a persecutor, but after having no success to engage local Donatist leaders in debate, his tone begins to change after 396: William H.C. Frend, 'Augustine and State Authority. The Example of the Donatists', in *Agostino d'Ipbona. «Quaestiones disputatae»* (Palermo, 1989), 49-73. See also Peter Brown, 'St. Augustine's attitude to religious coercion', *JRS* 54 (1964), 107-16; Maria L.A. Tacelli, 'I donatisti tra impero e Chiesa. Riflessioni preliminari per uno studio delle relazioni tra potere politico e potere ecclesiastico nel corso dello scisma africano', *Il diritto di famiglia e delle persone* 30 (2001), 1257-64. Very useful and interesting is the recent book published by Brent D. Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge, 2011), specially 141-5 and 409-40.

²³ This letter would serve as a preventive measure as he was finishing the composition of the *Breuculus collationis cum Donatistis*.

that this situation was true? Or should we suspect that this is merely a rhetorical *topos*?

In my opinion, there is only some truth in Augustine's claims of isolation. Channels for discussion were always open, yet they were not as flowing and direct as Augustine wanted. For example, in one of his treatises Augustine criticizes the interpretation of the theme of Noah's ark proposed by his Donatist opponent of Hippo in a sermon delivered in the local Donatist cathedral.²⁴ Of course, Augustine did not attend to the Donatist office, but this passage proves that Augustine got to know all what was said there. We may suppose that Donatists were also well aware of what was said in Catholic churches.

The *Contra epistulas Petiliani* provides more evidence of this fact. It is clearly evident that the documents written by Petilian were available to Augustine, but this case also proves that the transmission of books was neither direct nor fast. First, Augustine receives indirectly an incomplete part of Petilian's letter (refuted in Book I) and later he obtains the entire letter (refuted in Book II). In my opinion, if Augustine had been absolutely sure that in the near future he would have at his disposal the full text of Petilian's letter, he would have waited till he could refute the whole work, but he knew very well that this could never happen. The same applies to the text of Cresconius, which Augustine got to know several years after its composition. The Donatists also managed to obtain the works of Augustine, as attested by the rage of Petilian when he knew of the form Augustine had given to the second book of *Contra epistulas Petiliani* (as indicated above).

To conclude we may ask in which way the communication between Augustine and his opponents was established. In some cases we know the history of the transmission of some documents: the bearers are members of the Catholic clergy. Yet this does not solve the problem, because we may ask: Who did convey the documents to them? Indeed, there is probably not a single pattern for transmission ways. In my opinion, however, we should take into account the role played in this process by North African laymen. They were tempted by Catholics and Donatists, both epistolary and orally, to move to his side. Therefore, they were addressees and readers of the works that both sides produced to make them join their ranks. From the letters of Augustine we know that many laymen asked him for clarification of doctrinal questions they had heard of. He was also probably consulted about the orthodoxy of works which came into the hands of these laymen. Letter 70 provides some evidence of this: Naucellio, probably a Donatist layman, provides Augustine with some information about the Donatist bishop Clarentius, a piece of information Augustine had longed for. Or, at the very beginning of *De unico baptismo*, Augustine tells us how the namesake treaty of Petilian had reached his hands through the intercession of a *frater* (probably a catholic layman of high social status) who received it from a Donatist priest.

²⁴ Augustine, *ep. ad cath. de sect. Donat.* 5.9.

Thus we can conclude that between 392 and 411, letters were an essential instrument in Augustine's controversy against Donatists. At the same time however, they were less and less used by him. As regards to its content, we find in them the main topics of the controversy as Augustine saw it, yet some of them (such as the refutation of Cyprian authority on rebaptism or the theme of the *bona ecclesiae* in Donatists' hands) were only fully developed in his treatises. Conversely, historical episodes of the schism were discussed in more detail in the letters.

However, until the end of his life Augustine did not refuse discussion. For instance, in 418 he tried to hold a public debate with Emeritus of Caesarea;²⁵ and again around 420 with Gaudentius of Thamugadi – in this case in a literary form – only to convince him that armed resistance of Donatists and their death menaces were to assure neither one's martyrdom nor direct access to heavenly rewards. Nevertheless, I think that Augustine was not interested in this controversy anymore. Probably, he thought that after the official condemnation of 411, it was the law, and not his writings which were to drive Donatists to union (as showed by letter 185). His anti-Donatist letters and treatises had served to strengthen their condemnation as heretics in 405 and to justify the verdict of 411, as well as to show aristocrats and plebeian people that they were supporting the losing party. In the Augustinian mind, after 411 the Donatist cause was over. He now had new concerns emerging: the Pelagianist cause needed him.

²⁵ Gerald Bonner, 'Augustine's visit to Caesarea in 418', *Studies in Church History* 1 (1964), 104-13.