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Chapter 16

16
The Schismatic Reaction: Donatism

> What is debated between the Donatists and us is, where is to be found this body of Christ which is the church? Are we to seek the answer in our own words, or in those of the Head of the body, our Lord Jesus Christ?
>
> AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

While those who followed the monastic way of life expressed their dissatisfaction with the new order by withdrawing to the desert, others simply declared that the church at large had been corrupted, and that they were the true church. Of several splinter groups with similar views, the most numerous were the Donatists.

The Donatist controversy was one more instance in which the church was divided over the question of the lapsed and how they ought to be restored. After each period of violent persecution, the church had to face the issue of what to do with those who had yielded their faith, but who now sought to be restored to the communion of Christians. Although there were similar issues and schisms in the East, it was mostly in the Latin-speaking West, with its emphasis on law and order, that such schisms were most common and lasting. In the third century, this had resulted in the schism of Novatian in Rome; and in North Africa, Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, had to defend his episcopal authority against those who held that the confessors were the ones who should determine how the lapsed were to be restored. Now, in the fourth century, the debate over the restoration of the lapsed became particularly virulent in North Africa.

The persecution had been very violent in that region, and the number of those who had yielded was great. As in other cases, those who had yielded

had not done so to the same degree. Some bishops avoided further persecution by handing over to the authorities heretical books, and leading them to believe that these were Christian scriptures. Others turned in the genuine scriptures, claiming that in so doing they were avoiding bloodshed, and that this was their responsibility as pastors. Many, both clergy and lay, succumbed to imperial pressure and worshiped the pagan gods—indeed, the number of the latter was such that some chroniclers state that there were days when the pagan temples were full to overflowing.

On the other hand, there were many Christians who remained firm in their faith, and as a result suffered imprisonment, torture, and even death. As earlier, those who survived imprisonment and torture were called "confessors," and were particularly respected for the firmness of their faith. In Cyprian's time, some of the confessors had been too ready to readmit the lapsed, without any consultation with the authorities of the church. Now, after Constantine's conversion, a significant number of confessors took the opposite tack, insisting on greater rigor than the church was applying. These more demanding confessors claimed that the lapsed were not only those who had actually worshiped the gods, but also those who had handed the scriptures to the authorities. If changing a tittle or a jot in scriptures was such a great sin, argued the confessors, is it not an even greater sin to turn the sacred text over to be destroyed? Thus, some bishops and other leaders were given the offensive title of *traditores*—that is, those who had handed over or betrayed, a title often applied to Judas.

Such was the state of affairs when, shortly after the end of persecution, the very important bishopric of Carthage became vacant. The election fell on Caecilian. But he was not popular with the rigorist party, which elected Majorinus as his rival. In these elections there were intrigues and unworthy maneuvers on both sides, so that each was justified in claiming that his rival's election had been irregular. When Majorinus died shortly after being made rival bishop of Carthage, his party elected Donatus of Casae Nigrae, who became their leader for almost half a century, and from whom the Donatist movement eventually derived its name.

Naturally, the rest of the church was profoundly disturbed by this schism in North Africa, for it was possible to acknowledge only one bishop of Carthage. The bishops of Rome and of several other important cities declared that Caecilian was the true bishop of Carthage, and that Majorinus and Donatus were usurpers. Constantine, who was greatly interested in keeping the church together so that it could help unify his empire, followed

the lead of these bishops, and sent instructions to his officers in North Africa, that they should acknowledge only Caecilian and those in communion with him. This had important practical consequences, for Constantine was issuing legislation in favor of Christianity, such as tax exemption for the clergy. On the basis of his instructions to North Africa, only those in communion with Caecilian could enjoy these benefits—or receive any of the gifts that Constantine was offering to the church.

What were the causes of the Donatist schism? The foregoing is only the outward history of its beginnings. But in truth the schism had theological, political, and economic roots. The theological justification, and immediate cause of the schism, had to do with the issue of dealing with those who yielded during a time of persecution. According to the Donatists, one of the three bishops who had consecrated Caecilian was a *traditor*—that is, had delivered scriptures to the authorities—and therefore the consecration itself was not valid. Caecilian and his party responded by claiming, first, that the bishop was not a *traditor* and, second, that even had he been one, his action in consecrating Caecilian would still have been valid. Thus, besides the factual question of whether or not this particular bishop—and others in communion with Caecilian—had yielded, there was the additional issue of whether an ordination or consecration performed by an unworthy bishop was valid. The Donatists declared that the validity of such an act depended on the worthiness of the bishop performing it. Caecilian and his followers responded that the validity of the sacraments and of other such acts cannot be made to depend on the worthiness of the one administering them, for in that case all Christians would be in constant doubt regarding the validity of their own baptism or of the communion of which they had partaken. Since it is impossible to know the inner state of the soul of a minister offering such sacraments, there would be no way to dispel doubt regarding their validity.

The Donatists, on their part, insisted that Caecilian, whose consecration had been flawed by the participation of a *traditor*, was not really a bishop, and that for that reason all those whom he had ordained were false ministers, whose sacraments had no validity. Furthermore, the other bishops whose consecration was not in no doubt had sinned by joining in communion with people such as Caecilian and his party. In consequence, their sacraments and ordinations were no longer valid.

Given the two positions, if a member of Caecilian's party decided to join the Donatists, a new baptism was required, for the Donatists claimed that a baptism administered by their opponents was not valid. But, on the

other hand, those who left the Donatist party were not rebaptized by Caecilian and his followers, who held that baptism was valid regardless of the worth of the person administering it.

Besides the matter of the validity of sacraments administered by an unworthy person, the debate had to do with two very different conceptions of the church. The Donatists held that the church, being the bride of Christ, had to be pure and holy, while their opponents pointed to the parable of the wheat and the tares, which suggests that it is best for the disciples not to try to adjudge who is worthy and who is not, but rather leave that judgment to the Lord. For one party, the holiness of the church consisted of the holiness of its members; for the other, it was grounded in the holiness of its Lord. For the Donatists, what gave authority to a priest or bishop was his personal holiness; for their opponents, such authority was derived from the office—which was a common principle of Roman law.

These were the main theological issues involved in the debate. But when one reads between the lines of the documents of the time, one becomes aware that there were other causes of conflict often obscured by the theological debates. Thus, it appears that among the Donatists there were some who had delivered the scriptures to the authorities, and even some who had made an entire inventory of all the objects that the church used in worship, in order to give that inventory to the authorities. Yet, these people were accepted among the Donatists. Furthermore, one of the first leaders of Donatism was a certain Purpurius, who had murdered two nephews. Thus, it is difficult to believe that the real source of enmity of the Donatists toward the rest of the church was their concern for purity.

It is a fact that the two parties soon separated along social and geographical lines. In Carthage and its immediate surroundings—Proconsular Africa—Caecilian and his followers were strong. But farther west, in Numidia and Mauritania, the Donatists were very popular. Numidia and Mauritania were agricultural areas. A great deal of their produce was exported to Italy through Carthage. The net result was that as middle-men the Carthaginians, with less labor and risk, made more money from the crops than those who actually raised them. Furthermore, Numidia and Mauritania were much less Romanized than Carthage and the area around it. Many in the less Romanized areas retained their ancestral language and customs, and saw Rome and everything connected with it as a foreign and oppressive force. In Carthage, on the other hand, there was a strongly Latinized class of landowners, merchants, and military officers, and it was

this class that reaped most of the benefits of trade and other contacts with Italy. For these people, good relations with Rome as well as with the rest of the empire were of paramount importance. But in Carthage itself, as well as in its outlying districts, there were numerous people among the lower classes whose feelings were similar to those of the Numidians and Mauritanians.

The birthplace of Donatism.

Long before the advent of Constantine, Christianity had made significant inroads in Numidia, among the lower classes of Proconsular Africa, and in Mauritania, though to a lesser degree. The new faith of these converts was a force even the empire could not overcome. At the same time, fewer members of the Romanized classes of Carthage had embraced Christianity. This brought into the Christian community some of the class tensions of the rest of society. But at that time those who were converted—particularly those of the higher classes—had to break many of their social contacts, and therefore the tensions within the church were not as great as they could have been.

This situation changed drastically with the advent of Constantine and the peace of the church. Now one could be both a good Roman and a good Christian. Following the lead of the emperor, the Romanized classes flocked to the church. Others from the same social strata who had been converted earlier saw this as a positive development, for their earlier decision was

now corroborated by that of other important people. But Christians from the lower classes tended to see the new developments as a process of corruption of the church. What these Christians had always hated in the Roman Empire was now becoming part of the church. Soon the powerful—those who controlled politics and the economy—would also control the church. It seemed necessary to resist that process, and to remind the newly converted powerful that when they were still worshiping pagan gods, the supposedly "ignorant" Numidians, Mauritanians, and others knew the truth.

All this may be seen in the various stages of the conflict. Caecilian was elected with the support of the Romanized Christians of Carthage. His election was opposed by the lower classes in Proconsular Africa, and by almost all of the people and the clergy of Numidia. Before he had even had time to study the issues being debated, Constantine decided that Caecilian's party represented the legitimate church. The same was decided by the bishops of the great Latin cities—and eventually by those of Greek cities. On the other hand, the Donatists were quite willing to accept the support of those members of the Numidian clergy who had weakened during the persecution.

This does not mean that from its origins Donatism was consciously a political movement. The early Donatists were not opposed to the empire, but to "the world"—although for them many of the practices of the empire were worldly. They repeatedly sought to persuade Constantine that he had erred in deciding in favor of Caecilian. Even as late as the reign of Julian, during the second half of the century, some Donatists hoped that Roman authorities would see the error of their ways, and come to the support of the movement.

Around the year 340, there appeared among the Donatists a group called the *circumcellions*—a name of debatable origin, which probably means that they had their headquarters in martyrs' shrines. They were mostly Numidian and Mauritanian Donatist peasants who resorted to violence. Although sometimes they have been depicted as no more than bandits masquerading as people driven by religious motives, the truth is that they were religious to the point of fanaticism. They were convinced that there was no death more glorious than that of the martyrs, and that now that persecution in the old style had ended, those who died in battle against the perverters of the faith were also martyrs. In some cases, this quest for martyrdom rose to such a pitch that people committed mass suicide by jumping off cliffs. This may well be fanaticism; but it is not opportunistic hypocrisy.

The circumcellions became an important factor in the schism. Sometimes the Donatist leaders in the towns tried to disassociate themselves from this radical party. But at other times, when they needed activist troops, they appealed to the circumcellions. The time came when many villas and land holdings in secluded places had to be abandoned. The rich and those who represented the empire did not dare travel though the countryside without heavy escort. More than once, the circumcellions appeared at the very gates of fortified towns. Credit suffered, and trade almost came to a standstill.

In response, Roman authorities had no recourse but to use force. There were persecutions, attempts to persuade the dissidents, massacres, and military occupation. All to no avail. The circumcellions were the expression of a deep discontent among the masses, and the empire was unable to stamp out the movement. As we shall see later on, shortly thereafter the Vandals invaded the area, thus putting an end to Roman rule. But even under the Vandals the movement continued. In the sixth century, the Eastern Roman Empire—with its capital in Constantinople—conquered the region. But the circumcellions continued. It was only after the Muslim conquest late in the seventh century that Donatism and the circumcellions finally disappeared.

In conclusion, Donatism—particularly its radical branch, the circumcellions—was a response to the new conditions brought about by the conversion of Constantine. While some Christians received the new order with open arms, and others withdrew to the desert, the Donatists simply broke with the church that had now become an ally of the empire. Even so, the serious theological questions they had raised about the nature of the church and the validity of the sacraments would force other Christians, notably Saint Augustine, to deal with these issues. It was partly in response to the Donatists that Augustine and others developed their doctrine of the church, their view of the validity of sacraments, and the Just War Theory. Thus, as is often the case, those whom the rest of the church eventually rejected as heretics and schismatics left their mark in the theology that was developed in order to refute them.