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Clerical Leadership in Late Antiquity: Augustine on Bishops' Polemical and Pastoral Burdens

Augustine returned from Italy to North Africa in 388, apparently elated to have found his calling. The cities he had known, Thagaste and Carthage, and would soon come to know, Hippo Regius, were relatively prosperous, despite taxes collected for the central government which had been making increasing demands since the time of Emperor Constantine. The funds available for municipal improvements were depleted (gravement amputés), Claude Lepelley calculated, siting the African cities in “a history of inexorable decline” from the 380s into the 430s.¹ In the coastal city of Hippo, however, Augustine, as bishop was busy from the late 390s, exchanging ideas and insults with polemicists of various stripes. He had not meant to take a prominent part in African Christianity's bouts with sectarians, secessionists, and pagans. He planned to retire to his family estate in Thagaste with several like-minded friends. He only traveled to Hippo to consult with a man whom he hoped to tempt to join his small company of contemplatives and perhaps to confer with the faithful about the prospects for locating another contemplative collective there. He tells us he disliked traveling. He feared that his reputation for eloquence and insight might tempt the faithful far from his home and friends in Thagaste to waylay him to fill a vacancy. He would be safe in Hippo, he thought; the incumbent, Valerius, was well respected. Yet, at that time (391), Valerius was thinking ahead. He had his parishioners seize Augustine, ordained him, and after several years nominated him as his coadjutor and successor.²

¹ Lepelley, *Les Cités de l'Afrique Romaine au Bas-Empire*, 2 vols. (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1979 - 1981) 1: 197 and 1: 414.

² Augustine, Sermon 355, 2. References to Augustine's work employ the section divisions used in the *Patrologia Latina*, the most accessible, on-line edition, <http://www.augustinus.it/latino/index.htm>. All translation are mine; citations have been checked against Augustine's works in the Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum.

Augustine's first biographer, Possidius, bishop of Calama, roughly thirty miles from Hippo, claimed that Valerius's guest-turned-associate-turned-successor consented to serve only after considerable pressure had been applied (compulsus atque coactus succubuit), but Augustine was almost certainly the source for that story, which echoed protests he later expressed, when he seemed fatigued by the business (negotium) of being bishop as well as nostalgic for the leisure (otium) and learned discourses at Cassiciacum or Thagaste. He insisted that, before the Hippo clergy and laity seized him, he had no interest in leading churches.³

It seems sound to say that socioeconomic factors that drew others to church leadership were irrelevant. Augustine may have been moved by the incumbent's--Valerius's--compelling appeal for help. If so, either he did not tell Possidius or Possidius misremembered the story. Of one thing, we may be fairly sure. Although candidates were often attracted to the episcopacy by fourth-century developments that "open[ed] the church to the world" and that spurred ambition, as Werner Eck argues, Augustine was not.⁴ As bishop of Hippo, he doggedly scolded colleagues for chasing promotions. He was austere and expected austerity of colleagues. He emphasized the distinction between the Christians' hopes for eternal reward, which bishops ought to cultivate by preaching the promises in the sacred texts and pillorying desires for temporal gains that appeared to animate pagans' pursuits of name and fame. If we may trust Possidius, even before Augustine became bishop, he urged Christians to turn away from the enticements of this world (illicebras).⁵

³ Possidius, Sancti Augustini vita, 8, ed. Herbert Weiskotten (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1919).

⁴ Werner Eck, "Der Einfluß der konstantinischen Wende auf die Auswahl der Bischöfe im 4. und 5. Jahrhundert," Ariel 8 (1978), 568-70 and 576-80.

⁵ Augustine, Epistle 209.6; Augustine, Sermon 157.5; Possidius, Vita 3.

He admired his faith's martyrs, specifically for that "turn away" and for the virtues he came to identify with the church's leadership and to commend to its laity. Martyrs' perseverance delighted God, Augustine imagined, but heroic deaths were hard to come by, after authorities in government service stopped persecuting most Christians. Suicidal secessionists associated with Donatist Christians, Augustine said, were misguided. Their desire to stage heart-stopping scenes of their suffering by provoking reprisals discredited Christianity.⁶ Presuming to extrapolate from sacred literature what mattered to God, Augustine concluded that it was not how the faithful left this world, how they died (non qua occasione exeant), but how they lived in it.⁷ Yet living in it austerely, living in but not of the world, as he encouraged, did not necessarily preclude political maneuvering. Possidius's biography probably reflected Augustine's notion that the culmination of his career was the outcome of the Council of Carthage (411)--particularly, its proscriptions against Donatists. "All that valuable work," Possidius declared, "was begun and brought to perfection by Augustine."⁸

⁶ Augustine, Contra Cresconium 3.49, 54 and Augustine, Epistle 185.12. Also see Bernhard Kriegbaum, Kirche der Traditoren oder Kirche der Martyrer (Innsbruck: Tyrolia, 1986), 152-54; Kaufman, "Donatism Revisited: Moderates and Militants in Late Antique North Africa," Journal of Late Antiquity 2 (2009), 135-39; and, for Donatists' version of "suicide-by-cop," Brent Shaw, Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 762-64. See W.H.C. Frend, The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa, reprint edition (Oxford: Clarendon, 1970) for the best account of the secessionists' origins, but also consult Maureen A. Tilley, The Bible in Christian North Africa: The Donatist World (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), for secessionists' alternatives to armed resistance. To put the persecutions in context, see H. A. Drake, "Intolerance, Religious Violence, and Political Legitimacy in Late Antiquity," Journal of the American Academy of Religion 79 (2011), 193-235.

⁷ Augustine, Epistle 111.6. Yet bishops' heroism was very much on Augustine's mind after the Vandals invaded North Africa. He urged bishops not to abandon their flocks as the enemy advanced, and Possidius included that long appeal in his biography (Vita, 30). Elena Zocca, "La figura santo vescovo in Africa da Ponzio a Possidio," in Vescovo e pastori in epoca Teodosiana, vol. 2 (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1997), 489-91 suggests Augustine's letter encouraging courage was raison d'être for the biographical account.

⁸ Possidius, Vita, 13 (coeptum et perfectum est); also, for correspondences between Augustine's and Possidius's ideals of episcopal service, consult Eva Elm, Die Macht der Weisheit: Das Bild des Bischofs in der "Vita Augustini" des Possidius und anderen spätantiken und frühmittelalterlichen Bischofsviten (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 143.

So, despite his reluctance to countenance Christians measuring success in pleasing God in temporal terms, Augustine seems to have placed great value on his concrete policy successes against Donatists who, as it happened, esteemed Christianity's martyrs as much as--if not more than--Augustine and his catholic colleagues who had welcomed the emperors' agents' material assistance. Ascertainably at the Council of Carthage, but also in the villages and municipalities where bishops served alongside local curiales to maintain order, distinctions between bishops and the civil magistracy were "blurry." Bishops and their courts were conspicuous parts of the empire's political infrastructure.⁹ In the early fifth century, Emperor Honorius's chancery was unrealistic to assume that the entire clerical community--including the new faith's conspicuous leaders--could devote itself to prayer, freed by imperial decree or law from vexatious concerns related to regional commerce and politics.¹⁰

But bishops became civic patrons in concert with their towns' curiales. To judge from Augustine's correspondence, the best bishops advocated for the poor who were victimized by schemes to maximize tax revenues. To Romulus, whom he had converted to Christianity, the bishop of Hippo wrote indignantly after a plan to extort money from tenants had been exposed. The suffering of those victimized by fraud and intimidation would only last for a time, Augustine pointed out, but Romulus's torment and that of other landlords and tax collectors preying on their neighbors would be everlasting.¹¹ Of course, the effectiveness of such reprimands would depend

⁹ For "blurry," see Claudia Rapp, Holy Bishops in Late Antiquity: The Nature of Christian Leadership in an Age of Transition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 172-73.

¹⁰ Constitutiones Sirmondianae, 11; Codex Theodosiana, 16.2, 40; both accessible at http://droitromain.upmf-grenoble.fr/Codex_Theod.htm.

¹¹ Augustine, Epistle 247, 1; for other "interventions" de ce genre, Claude Lepelley, "Le patronat épiscopal aux IV^e et V^e siècles continuités et ruptures avec le patronat classique," in L'Évêque dans la cite du IV^e au V^e siècle: Image et autorité, ed. Éric Rebillard and Claire Sotinel (Rome: École française, 1998), 30-33.

on offenders' faith and fears. Hence, Augustine favored the appointment of ombudsmen to cope with commoners' complaints. Perhaps he saw to the appointment of the arbiter or defensor who addressed issues related to the liquidation of the Donatist parishes in his diocese--and who heard complaints against the man Augustine designated to preside over such affairs in Fussala. But the evidence is slender and seems contradicted by Augustine's admission that he was unable to place defensores in Hippo to defend commoners against the elites in Hippo. Bishops could grieve with afflicted parishioners, as he instructed, yet were powerless to relieve their misery.¹²

The difficulties he was facing may have been related to problems experienced by many cities in the empire which looked to defensores to ensure what Robert Frakes's studies of their roles calls "efficient justice." Precisely at the time Augustine articulated the need for respected ombudsmen to umpire civil disputes, the curial "class" was polarized. The affluent preferred a restructuring that gave them greater authority than their less prominent colleagues on the curia and reduced defensores to "minor bureaucratic functionar[ies]." Still, during the fourth century, municipal councils--all curiales--increasingly lost power to representatives of a reorganized and resurgent central government. Augustine and other bishops, "operating in conjunction" with the curiales, with emperors' deputies and often without defensores, as Claudia Rapp learned, were never fully integrated into the administration of justice.¹³

¹² Compare Augustine, Epistle 20*.29 (the defensor in the diocese) with Augustine, Epistle 22*.2 and 4 (the need for defensores). For the former, see Jean-Anatole Sabw Kanyang, Episcopus et plebs: L'évêque et la communauté ecclésiastique dans les conciles africains (345 - 525) (Bern: Peter Lang, 2000), 280.

¹³ See Rapp, Holy Bishops, 287-88 and Robert M. Frakes, "Contra Potentium Iniurias": The "Defensor Civitatis" and Late Roman Justice (Munich: Beck, 2001), 224-26.

Even the formidable Bishop Ambrose of Milan was an outsider. The Court used him as an emissary. True, Augustine witnessed his stand-off with Empress Justina, which resulted in an embarrassing setback for Arian Christians at the Court of her son, Valentinian II in 386. But the rhetoric in correspondence generated by that confrontation is somewhat misleading, as Rita Lizzi reports, insofar as it suggests the parties were equipollenti, equally matched. Not so. Indeed, “the torturous process” of negotiations between delegates from the Milanese church and “the state” as well as the outcome were influenced by forces beyond the control of either.¹⁴

Describing the distinct objectives of church and Court, Karl Leo Noethlichs characterizes the partnerships they often contracted as Konfliktverbindung[en], contentious connections. Each partner, protecting its “turf,” tried to limit the scope of the other’s proclaimed purposes. And the attempts--predictably--limited the extent of their cooperation.¹⁵ Augustine looks to have been attempting to avoid contention. His overtures to the powerful refrained from pitting his church against Realpolitik. He wrote to Tribune Marcellinus, counselling “clemency,” as one Christian to another, without insinuating that, as bishop, he possessed a superior perspective or held down a position entitling him to moral outrage.¹⁶ And, taking a parishioner’s case to civil officials, he reported without recrimination the petty “humiliations” to which he was subjected, kept waiting and made to feel, if not contemptible, insignificant. He only obliquely complained of unlikeable bureaucrats.¹⁷

¹⁴ Rita Lizzi, “I vescovi e i potentes della terra: definizione e limite del ruolo episcopale nelle due partes imperii fra IV e V secolo,” in L’Évêque dans la cité, 96-97.

¹⁵ K. L. Noethlichs, “Materialen zum Bischofsbild aus den spätantiken Rechtsquellen,” Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum 16 (1973), 54.

¹⁶ Augustine, Epistle 139.2.

¹⁷ Augustine, Sermon 302.17.

And he only rarely complained about indifferent or ill-tempered civic officials, although highly placed prelates would have expected some disrespect from African magistrates, many of whom still resented the lost prestige of Rome's old religions. Still, within the churches, bishops were their flock's foremen, their shepherds. They were "in charge," Augustine explained and added that it was nonetheless unworthy of them to exploit their authority to feather their nests. Organizational necessity made bishops bosses, he said, yet they should take neither profit nor pleasure from their prestige and power.¹⁸

Bishops were the apostles' successors. Their leadership, according to Augustine, signaled that the church had not been forsaken when the apostles passed. Replacing Peter, Paul, and other early Christian authorities, bishops comprised--unmistakably, for Augustine--"a new paternity." They were the church's fathers as well as foremen.¹⁹ The necessity they had been appointed to address, at least the most pressing challenge in Africa where "contrary voices" caused schisms, was organizational unity. Only when fractious church politics ceased, when parishioners were reconciled, and when flocks were fed the truth from the trough of their sacred texts interpreted by right-minded bishops, should the sheep that God entrusted to the apostle Peter and his heirs (John 21:17) expect effective shepherds to emerge from--and to lead--them. Yet even effective shepherds, Augustine claimed, were burdened with sin. They cleared obstacles to repentance, delivering the laity from captivity, but their "stains" remained. That alone ought to have humbled them and kept them from overreaching when they preached obedience.²⁰

¹⁸ Augustine, Sermon 46.2.

¹⁹ Augustine, Enarrationes in Psalmos 44.32.

²⁰ Augustine, Sermons 46.30; 134.3; and 146.1. Also see Elm, Die Macht der Weisheit, 141.

Some Christians did overreach. Augustine witnessed them preaching controversial doctrines and demanding obedience to pronouncements bearing on the conduct within--and, more problematically, the importance of separating from--the church. An early sign of such overreaching was insubordination, which tended toward insurrection. Augustine commented angrily on such insolence when he preached on a psalm that scolded defiance. He depicted the bulls mentioned there as sectarians intent on leading cows and calves astray. Bulls, proud and stubborn, proselytized “frivolously,” he said, but compellingly. They drew auditors from their more perceptive bishops (intellegentiores). Heretical bulls’ doctrines tested not only the mettle of the faithful but the competence of the church’s leadership. Heresy, Augustine proposed, was a divinely ordained occasion for the intellegentiores to display their abilities to convey the truths of sacred literature and to maintain the unity of their churches. Heresy, moreover, rewarded the best bishops with celebrity and influence. They might have continued in obscurity as humble servants of their churches, avoiding opportunities to exhibit their gifts. But, encountering the insolence and idiocy of their arrogant rivals (superborum contradictiones), the church’s more erudite yet reluctant and obscure bishops showed themselves, Augustine said, as well as the power of their faith’s truths. He acknowledged that there would always be bulls among the herds or wolves to threaten the flocks--yet, extinguishing the errors spawned by their opinions, the better bishops proved their leadership of the Christian community.²¹

Late in his career, Augustine preached a short sermon, airing out his impatience with colleagues who seemed to have had no interest in becoming those “better bishops.” It addressed prelates relatively inattentive to their duties and insufficiently serious about stewardship of their

²¹ Augustine, Enarrationes in Psalmos 67.39.

churches. “Let them . . . work for parishioners rather than offer excuses.” They were overseers, ἐπίσκοποι, whose oversight meant disciplining the faithful and answering chronic complainers, Augustine emphasized in that sermon and, in another, suggested that oversight presumed there was something good or creditable as well as discreditable conduct to oversee. The implication was that bishops’ reprimands would become intolerable burdens to those who issued them unless they could also attest the uplifting results of their ministries. Augustine apparently hoped that the difficulty of bishops’ tasks and especially the parishioners’ parts in rewarding their prelates with changes in behavior might not be lost on the faithful.²²

In a sermon delivered in 325, on the anniversary of his ordination, he labored the point. He told parishioners why burdens (sarcinae) that bishops carried were heavier than those borne by other Christians. He likely anticipated that the explanation would encourage laity to lighten their load and that of their bishops or, at the very least, to refrain from adding to them. He began with the certainty that parishioners would answer in the hereafter for misbehavior here. God had appointed bishops as overseers yet also watched from a celestial perch the faithful’s failures and watched for improvements. Bishops were watched as well. Responsible for the laity’s progress, they were in greater trouble should they fall--or fall in with--their fallible flocks. For example, monstrous punishments (immanissima poena) awaited those the bishops whose oversight was compromised by their desire for popularity. Augustine’s sermon wasted little sympathy on ill-fated bishops; he seemed sure that many eternally condemned could have been spared eternal torment if the church’s clerical leaders were more energetic and implacable moral monitors.²³

²² Augustine, Sermon Dolbeau 10.2 and Sermon 94: erogent quod acceperunt, operari magis quam excusare dignentur.

²³ Augustine, Sermon 339.1-2.

His anniversary sermon exploits the parable in the nineteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, which reports a king's displeasure with his deputy who returned only the funds given him on his master's departure. Other stewards invested and increased their sums and were rewarded. The steward who did not even bank the original sum and collect interest was scolded. The lesson Augustine apparently intended to impart was that bishops ought to circulate their faith's truths to collect the souls within their precincts. Prelates' love for parishioners ought to motivate them, he said, particularly because the gospels' promises assured them that the honesty and goodwill they inspired among the faithful would make up for the latter's hypocrisies and indignities. But the alternative, reassuring the faithful-yet-persistently-sinful that God's mercy covered a multitude of sins, was dereliction of duty and a sign that bishops who traded in such assurances had traded probity for popularity. Augustine was scrupulous, stipulating to colleagues and to the laity what bishops could and could not do. They could only--and should tirelessly--pronounce the truths in their sacred texts, truths that set their parishioners free conscientiously to please God. They were not commissioned to condemn but to censure, reiterating what the gospels proscribed, as well as to pronounce God's judgments in advance so that parishioners would knowledgeably recalibrate their courses or, in the wake of trespasses, bishops were to awaken remorse and spur repentance. No prelate would have elected such onerous duty; Augustine confided that he might have picked another profession, had Jesus's directive ("feed my sheep") not frightened him. To be vexatious and tedious to the laity was not what the church's leaders would have wished for themselves; nonetheless, bishops would be botching their jobs, Augustine said, if they left parishioners to wallow in their possessions--and if they asked to be left to enjoy their own leisure, making no fuss over the immortality of others.²⁴

²⁴ Augustine, Sermon 339.2-4.

Augustine later accused the specialists who led the Manichees and whose responsibilities were not unlike those of Christianity's bishops of overvaluing their leisure and failing to monitor their followers' behavior. He spent nearly ten years in North Africa and Italy hearing about--and listening to--that sect's elite. He believed them to be a breed set apart to impart secrets about the origins and conflicts in the cosmos and to liberate Light trapped in matter because they resisted conscientiously the temptations that assailed ordinary men and women. Manichaean Specialists and their partisans regarded Mani, a third-century Persian prophet as their founder, yet many among them also identified as Christians and wrestled with mysteries contained in that faith's sacred texts. From the late 370s into the 380s, Augustine, less impressed than later with truths teased from Christian literature, looked to his Manichaean friends and the sect's itinerant teachers for insights.²⁵

By the mid-380s, his disappointment in the Manichees' leadership peaked. He regretted his prior credulity. He wrote a series of caustic treatises against the Manichaeism. The first was composed very soon after his baptism. He concentrated on the specialists' interpretations of the Old Testament, but complaints about their lewd behavior sprawled across the pages. And after he became more committed to--and knowledgeable about--Christianity, he appreciated bishops who preached humility and shunned the sort of celebrity (non amant proapatula) that Manichees' leaders prized. They pretended to be abstemious but were insincere, he charged; the sect's elite were petulant, promiscuous, and duplicitous. Years after he had grown disenchanted with them, Augustine professed that he had never met a member of the Manichaean elite or "elect," whose conduct was above suspicion. He was particularly annoyed at one flimsy excuse lecherous and

²⁵ Augustine, Confessiones 3.10, 18.

fatuous teachers offered when they were caught in a compromising position: the offenders explained to other Manichees that Judaism's and Christianity's heroes--from Adam to the apostles--were known to have strayed and to have sinned egregiously, yet were also commemorated as pillars of their faiths.²⁶

Augustine tells us in his Confessions that he was expecting to reap considerable profits from his conversations with one Manichaean specialist, Faustus, who had come to Carthage to study classical literature. Faustus assumed that lessons with Augustine would help him make Manichaeism an attractive alternative to Christians. Augustine anticipated that Faustus might make more sense than Christian bishops had of the mysteries and seemingly absurd stories recorded in their sacred texts.²⁷ One could say, notwithstanding the generations of prelates drawing inferences about good, evil, and from biblical passages, that intelligent Christians experienced a crisis of intelligibility in the late fourth century. François Decret exaggerates, although, perhaps, only slightly--when he depicts the expectations that attached to Faustus's coming to Carthage as "messianic."²⁸

Before becoming bishop, Augustine recalled his intellectual crisis. He was frustrated, he said; teachers either fended off or failed to answer satisfactorily his questions about the origin of the cosmos, the purposes of human life, and the meaning of "difficult" passages in Christianity's

²⁶ Augustine, De moribus ecclesiae Catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum 2.19, 68 - 2.19, 72.

²⁷ Augustine, Confessiones 5.7, 12.

²⁸ François Decret, Aspects du Manichéisme dans l'Afrique Romaine (Paris: Etudes augustiniennes, 1970), 58-59. Jason David Beduhn's Augustine's Manichaean Dilemma: Conversion and Apostasy (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010) 241-43 suggests that a predilection for esotericism initially attracted Augustine to the sect and held his interest until Faustus disappointed him. From then, he doubted the Manichees' leadership and, increasingly, found that insight came with faith and that faith was the threshold to "a gradual conformation to a system as one learns it more thoroughly [from its bishops] and keeps adjusting one's sense of self."

sacred texts. As noted, he found that Faustus was little more than a buffoon. Only snippets from others' philosophies seemed intelligible to him. He could not decide what to profess and what to dismiss as superficial (quid mihi tenendum, quid dimittendum esset), until, in Milan, listening to Bishop Ambrose, he rediscovered Christianity. By then, what he came to criticize as Manichaean mystifications, parading as clarifications of sacred literature, lost their power over him. Ambrose showed him how to make sense of the passages in the Hebrews' scriptures that seemed to stretch credulity, stories that were interpreted so absurdly by Manichaean specialists that Augustine and his more sensible friends despised the Pentateuch and the prophets.²⁹ He continued to attack the Manichees, he said, because the not-so-sensible were so easily seduced by them. And, as bishop, he assumed the burden to protect the credulous from the Manichaean elite's "pestiferous" ideas and exegesis, which, he said, would not only leave them in ignorance but lead them to hell.³⁰

Augustine was sure that the crisis of intelligibility could never be finally resolved for or by the Manichees' leaders who, unlike Christianity's bishops, were convinced that the mysteries of faith might be put on a firm foundation of fact. They were following the lead of their founder, Mani, who, according to Augustine, overlooked human finitude and fallibility. The conceit that a mind could overcome limitations likely mobilized Mani's partisans, yet it could not rally them around a single theme that seemed to Augustine to address conclusively the issues raised by the mysteries of creation and redemption. And, unlike the bishops Augustine came to admire, Mani and his followers forgot that "we are mere men without wisdom."³¹

²⁹ Augustine, De utilitate credendi 8.20.

³⁰ Augustine, Contra epistulam Manichaei quam vocant Fundamenti 11.12.

³¹ Augustine, De moribus ecclesiae Catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum 1.7, 11; Augustine, Contra epistulam Manichaei quam vocant Fundamenti 13.17; Augustine, Confessiones 5.7, 13.

Their misreading of the texture of the Christian faith made their cosmologies untenable. Part of their problem was, as has been noted here--and was repeatedly elaborated by Augustine--the Manichees' conceit. Another reason their specialists, including Faustus, failed to present an impressive and enduring resolution to the crisis of intelligibility was their plurality. Manichaean teachers were at odds with each other. Intense rivalries capsized every effort to reach consensus. Deprived of a basis in fact, which Mani was alleged to have promised, competing Manichaean teachers, not knowing their "unknowing," from Augustine's perspective, in effect, normalized dissent. None could claim "antiquity" for his truths, as could Christianity's bishops, following one another in succession--an apostolic succession--and articulating a consensus handed down from "those most solidly founded sees of the apostles."³²

Generations of Christians had debated whether bishops or sectarian teachers were more reliable sources of truth before Augustine closed ranks with colleagues in the African Christian churches. For example, the Acta Archelai, an early anti-Manichaean script circulated fifty years before Faustus and Augustine met. The text records (or stages) two debates between the prophet Mani and Bishop Archelaus of Carchar, a town in Persia, approximately one hundred miles from the Roman garrisons on the frontier. In both confrontations, the bishop prevailed and the prophet fled. Humiliation and flight punctuate an exceptionally unflattering account of Mani's life which accused him of having plagiarized his ideas. Just about everything about the Manichees' founder was indefensible--eminently assailable. The Acta impugned his aptitude and deportment as well as his originality.³³ Augustine took a very different tack in his Confessions after he reported his

³² Augustine, Contra Faustum Manichaeum 11.2.

³³ Hegemonius, Acta Archelai, ed. M.J. Vermes (Louvain: Brepols, 2001), 26.6.

disappointment with the widely esteemed Faustus, his admiration for Ambrose, and his intention to profess the Christians' faith. He paused to reflect on the years he spent among the Manichees, annoyed with himself for having trusted the sect's elect, for not having ascertained how baseless the specialists' sense of superiority was. He excoriated them for having posed as an aristocracy of virtue as well as an intellectual elite, yet he also pitied them, for they would never find what he had found--a remedy for arrogance in the psalms and in the church.³⁴

Nor had the Donatists found it. Augustine complained about their sense of superiority, their impatience with prelates who prudently schooled rather than excluded sinners. He most likely exaggerated the secessionists' impatience, increasingly as they failed to cease what he considered provocative behavior, declined chances to confer with him, and refused to listen to reason--to his reasons.³⁵ He welcomed the Donatists who elected to reconcile, practicing what they heard him preach. As bishop, as we learned, he bent every effort to have them repudiate their exclusive sect and join his more inclusive church.³⁶

Bishops were not only better teachers than were the Manichees' specialists, as Augustine insisted, they were better shepherds than the Donatists' bishops, who complicated the challenges facing the African Catholic Church. One of Augustine's sermons reflected at great length on the duties of his faith's shepherds, stressing the obligation to recall lost sheep. It explicitly accused Donatists of drawing souls ("sheep") from the safety of their church into secessionists' sects in which the misguided were sure to perish for want of charity. Augustine believed so because he

³⁴ Augustine, Confessiones 9.4, 8.

³⁵ Augustine, Contra Cresconium 2.1, 1: nolunt nobiscum habere colloquium.

³⁶ Augustine, Epistle 11*. 25; Augustine, Contra Cresconium 1.3, 4.

considered that secession and unrelenting schism signaled Donatists' uncharitable, intolerant, and intolerable attitude toward others.³⁷ They appeared to have forgotten the directive in the apostle Paul's first letter to Corinth, positioning charity or love above the other two theological virtues, faith and hope. Donatist bishops boasted of their predecessors' and partisans' eagerness to die for their faith during fourth-century persecutions and to add to Christianity's ample stock of martyrs. But charity superseded all else in Paul's passage, and supersession--in that context--gave Augustine the occasion to explain that suffering and dying for one's faith unaccompanied by love, by one's charitable dispositions, were worthless.³⁸

Still, Donatist secessionists and separatists had gained ground in the late fourth century. One of their leading bishops allied with an insurgent garrison commander who shut off supplies to Rome, forcing the emperor to send troops to discipline obstreperous local leaders. Augustine's parishioners panicked, confronting the bishop with another set of responsibilities--only indirectly related to his polemical duties and objectives yet closely associated with a bishop's commitment to commend charity to those hoarding rather than sharing supplies. In a sermon preached at the end of the fourth century, Augustine introduced nautical imagery; churches were ships in rough seas. Without dependable leadership, crews were without direction--without moral compass.³⁹

Subsequently, during crises occasioned by the Goths' invasions of Italy and the steady stream of refugees into Africa, Augustine tried to keep informed when business took him from Hippo and relayed instructions on receiving news that the comfortable among his congregation

³⁷ Augustine, Sermon 46.14.

³⁸ Augustine, Sermon 138.2.

³⁹ Augustine, Sermon 75.5-7.

were less than forthcoming with aid. Destitute residents as well as the refugees from Gaul, Spain, and Italy were left “unclothed.” Christians were pilgrims, he repeatedly stated; if they anticipated settling in a celestial homeland, he wrote from afar, his parishioners ought to use their surplus to relieve strangers’ and neighbors’ suffering--particularly when their terrestrial world appeared to be falling apart.⁴⁰

Augustine traveled to African church councils and to his colleagues’ dioceses, to hold the church together as the empire disintegrated. He never again crossed the Mediterranean. His first tour in the 380s was his last. Other bishops carried petitions to Rome and Ravenna to importune Emperor Honorius and his deputies at Court. Augustine was in demand closer to home. He was in Milevis, in late 425 or early 426, to ensure the promotion of a candidate whom the recently deceased incumbent, Severus, had nominated. The laity had been overlooked. The incumbent had only consulted his clergy. Augustine appeased the parishioners, but he took no credit for having avoided protracted conflict. He announced that the protests subsided, “by God’s will,” parishioners resolved to accept the nominee, and the bishop-designate was consecrated.⁴¹ But Severus’s mistake taught Augustine a valuable lesson. In 426, soon after he returned to Hippo from Milevis, he assembled his clerics and congregation to notify them of his plans for semi-retirement and to present Heraclius, whom he named collaborator and next bishop. He was confident that no objections would be raised. Hippo was acquainted with Heraclius, whose intelligence and modesty, Augustine averred, were widely known. But the conference was organized to test that perception. Augustine wanted confirmation and got it.⁴²

⁴⁰ Augustine, Epistle 122.2.

⁴¹ Augustine, Epistle 213.1.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 213.2.

Scribes recorded the responses, the crowd's cheers (acclamations), which Bishop Augustine predictably took as an endorsement. The document that survives among his letters reads like a transcript of the meeting. It also shows how scrupulous Augustine was to avoid a dual episcopacy. He had been named bishop by Valerius before the latter's death in the 390s, only to learn later that co-episcopacy had been forbidden at the Council of Nicaea earlier that century.⁴³ Possibly, the ongoing rivalries between Donatist and Catholic Christian bishops in some African towns also made Augustine wary of such an arrangement, as did his miscalculation in subdividing his diocese and appointing an obstreperous opportunist, Antoninus, to the new see of Fussala.⁴⁴ Yet Augustine was clear that Heraclius would be assigned many of a bishop's daily duties, which--unsurprisingly--included presiding in the diocesan court. For Augustine had never warmed to that part of his job. He had an aversion to the gavel. During previous deliberations, he persuaded parishioners to let him reserve five days each week for study, freeing him from the mind-numbing work plaguing incumbents involved in the laity's worldly affairs and enabling him to provide his colleagues with authoritative exegesis of sacred literature that could counter heretics' claims. But after a short time, everyday business intruded. He was again preoccupied with his parishioners' petty squabbles--cases brought into his "audience."⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid., 213.4.

⁴⁴ Augustine, Epistle 20*. 3-4, 8-9, and 18, but also consult Serge Lancel's "L'affaire d'Antoninus de Fussala: Pays, choses, et gens de la Numidie d'Hippone saisis dans la durée d'une procédure d'enquête épiscopale," in Les lettres de Saint Augustin découvertes par Johannes Divjak, ed. Joahannes Divjak ((Paris: Etudes augustiniennes, 1983), 283-84.

⁴⁵ Augustine, Sermon 137.14; Augustine, Epistle 33.5; Augustine, De opera monachorum 29.37; and Augustine, Enarrationes in Psalmos 25.2, 13. Also consult Clara Gebbia, "Sant'Agostino e l'Episcopalis Audientia," in L'Africa Romana, vol. 2, ed. Attilio Mastino (Sassari: Dipartimento di storia, Università degli studi di Sassari, 1988), 693-94.

From 426 and to the end of his pontificate and life in 430, Heraclius, it seems, presided over the bishop's court in Hippo. Augustine returned to the polemical and exegetical work that bishops, he believed, should pour into their sermons and correspondence. Still, he appeared to be on the defensive. Conceivably, he worried that his parishioners' enthusiasm for Heraclius's appointment might ebb and that the local laity would resent his time for study, seeing it as an objectionable extravagance. But Augustine refused to dignify objections by answering them directly. He had defended his faith's texts against the Manichaean specialists' preposterous interpretations. He marshalled arguments from sacred literature to undermine the Donatists' misreading of the faith's requirements. And he was still summoning passages to counter the excesses of Pelagian exegesis, which minimized the imperfectability of humanity. Bishops' polemical obligations were tightly bound with their pastoral leadership, Augustine insisted, maintaining that leisure was required to comb for, clarify, or correctly construe passages in biblical and extra-biblical texts that could be used against Catholic Christianity's interests. "Leisure" of that sort was a bishop's serious business.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Augustine, Epistle 213.6: Nemo ergo invidet otio meo, quia meum otium magnum habet negotium."