

THE PRAXIS OF ECCLESIOLOGY: LEARNING FROM THE DONATIST CONTROVERSY

The praxis of ecclesiology is at the heart of current conflicts over doctrine, discipline, and development in the Roman Catholic Church today. As new geographies and idioms of faith, multiple viewpoints and voices jostle with long-established narratives and fixed centers of authority, tensions build and clashes grow in frequency and intensity. Attempts to reassert a master narrative in a required language and to reconstruct an ecclesiology forged in the fires of the mid-nineteenth century are inadequate to the challenges facing an increasingly global church in a world where it occupies only a small part of the religious landscape.

Similar issues of pluralism, faith, structure and authority engaged Augustine the bishop as he confronted Donatist separatists in the early fifth century—an era nearly as unsettled and unsettling as our own. His evolving response to Donatism profoundly influenced the development of ecclesiology in the West. Changes in his praxis over the course of the controversy led to subtle but significant shifts in his vision of church, the importance of uniformity in faith and practice, and the meaning of charity. The implications of these shifts reverberate through centuries of the church's dealings with dissent and continue to make their effects felt today. Yet there are critical tensions in Augustine's praxis which, if explored, can uncover resources for countering his own decisions in regard to Donatism as well as for challenging some of the developments that have followed from them.

In exploring what we might learn from Augustine's handling of the Donatist controversy that could contribute to the development of our own praxis of ecclesiology, I will take soundings at five points along the way: (1) I begin by recalling some key features of the history and theology of Donatism; then (2) look at Augustine's early encounters with the Donatists and their dialogue over the authority of Cyprian; (3) chart the compass shifts that led to Augustine's endorsement of a policy of religious coercion; (4) examine some critical tensions in Augustine's praxis that result from these shifts; and (5) conclude by marking out some directions suggested by this case study for our own developing praxis of ecclesiology.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: THE ROOTS OF DONATISM

The Donatist schism originated in Carthage during the Great Persecution of 303–311, but its roots reached back to controversies a half-century earlier. Three related issues of ecclesiology, each emerging in a period of persecutions, set the theological context for Donatism: the forgiveness of the sin of apostasy; the

validity of schismatic baptism; the moral worthiness of the minister of a sacramental action.¹

First, in Rome and North Africa during the 250s schisms erupted over decisions that the bishop could forgive apostasy according to established disciplinary practices for other serious sins. In Rome the presbyter Novatian became bishop of a schismatic group that refused to allow the forgiveness of apostates. In Carthage schism grew from conflict between the confessors, who had suffered imprisonment during the persecution, and their bishop, Cyprian, who had exercised his pastoral office from a safe hiding place. In Cyprian's absence the confessors had issued "letters of peace" readmitting apostates to communion; they refused to relinquish this authority when he returned and reclaimed the power of the keys as belonging solely to the bishop as the successor of Peter. With the Roman schism in view and an eye to the one about to break in Carthage Cyprian wrote *On the Unity of the Catholic Church*, the earliest treatise on ecclesiology and a work that profoundly influenced the future shape of the Western church.

Second, controversy arose between Rome and Carthage over the validity of schismatic baptism as followers of Novatian began to seek admission to the "catholic" church. In Rome, bishop Stephen cited tradition in recognizing the validity of schismatic baptisms and simply required that those baptized by the Novatianists undergo a penitential process before being received into communion. In Carthage, Cyprian and the North African bishops met in council and declared schismatic baptism invalid, requiring anyone baptized outside the catholic church to be (re)baptized before being received into communion. Stephen threatened to break communion with Cyprian and others who opposed his theology and practice, but the two churches remained uneasily united until both bishops died during renewed persecution in 257-258.

Third, a half-century later, opponents of Caecilian's election as bishop of Carthage in 311/12 declared his consecration invalid on the grounds that one of the three required consecrating bishops was unworthy to minister because he

¹The classic work on Donatism remains W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952; reissued in 1985). Peter Brown critiques some of Frend's assertions about popular religion and protest in North Africa and nuances the development of Augustine's views on religious coercion in several essays in *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972) particularly "St. Augustine's Attitude To Religious Coercion," 260-78; see also relevant sections of his *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967) esp. 212-32. Frederik van der Meer's *Augustine the Bishop*, trans. Brian Battershaw and G. R. Lamb (London and New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961; 1947 Dutch original) still offers a fascinating mosaic of the daily pastoral work of Augustine, including his dealings with the Donatists, 79-117. The work of Maureen Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: The Donatist World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997) represents a new generation of students of Donatism and North African Christianity; see also her introduction and notes to *Donatist Martyr Stories: The Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa*, Translated Texts for Historians 24 (Liverpool: Liverpool Univ. Press, 1996).

allegedly had tainted himself by cooperating with imperial authorities during the persecution. The dissenters elected Majorinus as their bishop, followed by Donatus, from whom the movement took its name. The schism spread rapidly through North Africa despite Constantine's short-lived efforts to resolve it—asked to do so, ironically, by the Donatists, who thus made one of the first appeals for imperial intervention in a Christian theological controversy. When Augustine became bishop of Hippo in 396 the Donatists were stronger than ever.

AUGUSTINE AND THE DONATISTS: THE AUTHORITY OF CYPRIAN

In the early years of Augustine's engagement with the Donatists, he pursued a program of theological conferences with Donatist bishops, endeavoring to persuade them of the truth of catholic ecclesiology and sacramental theology and encouraging them to rejoin the unity of the church. The issues at stake between them included conflicting views of the nature of the church, of sacramental theology, and of the authority of Cyprian.²

The Donatists viewed the church as constituted by the ministry and sacraments of those who had not compromised themselves during persecution. The validity of baptism or episcopal ordination depends on the worthiness of the minister as measured by this standard of purity. In contrast, Augustine uses a much wider lens for defining both church and sacramental validity. For Augustine the framing image of church is a field of wheat and tares that will only be separated definitively on God's eschatological threshing floor. In history, however, the church administers sacraments that are valid and efficacious because of the grace of Christ who is their true minister, rather than relying on the presumed worthiness of any ecclesial minister.³

²In this paper I concentrate on some key works of Augustine's anti-Donatist writings, particularly the treatise *On Baptism* and *Letters* 93 and 185. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted by parenthetical page numbers. Text of *De baptismo* in CSEL 51, ed. M. Petschenig (Vienna: Tempsky; Leipzig: Freytag, 1908) 143-375; English translation by J. R. King, *Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, vol. 4, *St. Augustine: Writings against the Manichaeans and against the Donatists* (1887; repr.: Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1956) 407-514. Augustine presents his account of Donatist history and theology and reviews his arguments against them in two lengthy letters. *Letter* 93 was written in 408 to Vincentius, bishop of a Mauretanian sect known as the Rogatists: CSEL 34:2, ed. Al. Goldbacher (Prague and Vienna: Tempsky; Leipzig: Freytag, 1898) 445-96; ET by Sister Wilfrid Parsons, S.N.D., *Saint Augustine, Letters*, vol. 2 (83-130), *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 10 (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1953) 56-106. *Letter* 185 (also known as *On the Correction of the Donatists*) was written in 417 to Boniface, Count of Africa: CSEL 57, ed. Al. Goldbacher (Prague and Vienna: Tempsky; Leipzig: Freytag, 1909) 1-44; ET: Parsons, *St. Augustine, Letters*, vol. 4 (165-203), *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 30 (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1955) 141-90.

³Augustine works out the basic arguments about the theology of baptism and the authority of Cyprian in the seven books *On Baptism* (written in 400) and uses them repeatedly in his writings against the Donatists. It should be noted that Augustine's

In defending their ecclesiology and sacramental theology, the Donatists appealed to the authority of Cyprian, citing his denial of the validity of baptisms performed by heretics and schismatics. Augustine attempts to undercut their position and reclaim Cyprian for the catholic cause by means of a delicate maneuver. He admits that Cyprian's theology of baptism was mistaken and must be rejected. But he downplays the extent of Cyprian's error by observing that the other African bishops had agreed with him in opposing the baptismal theology and practice of Stephen and the Roman church. Careful not to tarnish Cyprian's memory, Augustine argues that the churches' sacramental praxis has continued to develop so that the theology and practice supported by Stephen of Rome in the third century and Caecilian of Carthage in the fourth have now been clearly articulated and widely accepted by the churches of the West. Contrary to Donatist ecclesiology and sacramental theology, then, schismatic baptisms are valid but incomplete because lacking in charity; they become fully effective only within the unity of the church.⁴

Augustine urges the Donatists to accept this catholic theology and join themselves to the larger church. His deft argument about the development of doctrine makes it possible to uncouple the memory of Cyprian from his erroneous theology, thus leaving his authority relatively intact. The Donatists can honor Cyprian's memory by putting aside his sacramental theology and following instead his example of charity, which, as Augustine sees it, is the salient feature of his authority. It was charity that enabled Cyprian to maintain the unity of the churches in the face of Stephen's threats of excommunication. Charity and communion, therefore, were greater values for Cyprian—and for Augustine—than uniform praxis, even on so fundamental a matter as baptism.

FROM CHARITY TO COERCION

Through his strategic handling of Cyprian's authority, Augustine selectively shapes the churches' memory of Cyprian and limits the kind of appeals that can

representation of Donatist ecclesiology is obviously polemical and lacks the nuances of contemporary scholarship: see Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa*, esp. her methodological observations, 1-8, 137-41, and conclusions, 175-80. Studies of Augustine's ecclesiology, on the other hand, often reflect polemical and confessional biases of their own: see the concise survey by Michael A. Fahey, S.J., "Augustine's Ecclesiology Revisited," in *Augustine: From Rhetor to Theologian*, ed. Joanne McWilliam (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 1992) 173-81.

⁴See *Baptism*, book 2, esp. chaps. 3-4 on the process by which truth is discerned by maintaining unity while allowing free and full discussion of differing views; also *Letter* 93.36-42. In commenting on *Baptism* in *Retractations* 2.44, Augustine remarks that "I taught that nothing is so effective as the letters and conduct of Cyprian for refuting the Donatists and completely closing their mouths . . ." (156). *Retractationes*, ed. A. Mutzenbecher, CCL 57 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1984); ET by Sister Mary Inez Bogan, R.S.M., *St. Augustine, The Retractations*, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 60 (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1968).

be made to it. By laying claim to the example of Cyprian's charity, Augustine in effect puts charity before doctrine, the practice of unity before sacramental unanimity. Over the course of his engagement with Donatism, however, Augustine moves away from the implications of his argument about the praxis of charity. He begins instead to insist on the necessity of uniform doctrine and practice in regard to sacraments and ecclesiology. So important does adherence to this standard of faith become for Augustine that in time he is willing to resort to coercion and bring imperial power to bear against the Donatists in order to "compel them to come in" to the Catholic church. How does this happen and what are its consequences for the praxis of ecclesiology? There are four main steps to this development in Augustine's praxis.

Charity and unity. Augustine's differential appropriation of Cyprian allows him to affirm Cyprian's understanding of charity and the unity of the church while rejecting his sacramental theology. For Augustine, as for Cyprian, charity is the "glue" of the church.⁵ It is the "unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3) that holds the church together both within and among local communities. Schism is a sin against charity, hence against the Holy Spirit. Cyprian concluded from this that schismatic baptisms could not be valid, yet charity moved him to remain in communion with those holding the opposite view. In contrast, Augustine, tutored in the Roman sacramental theology, believes that Donatist baptisms are valid but imperfect: they can be completed by charity, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and become fully effective when brought into the unity of the catholic church. By recognizing their baptism, Augustine grants the Donatists a measure of good faith as he seeks to win them over to catholic unity. Because he desires genuine conversions he is reluctant to use any coercive means and relies instead on charity and the persuasive power of the Spirit in his conferences with the Donatist bishops. "My first thought," he writes in a letter of 408, "was that no one should be forced into the unity of Christ, but that we should act by speech, fight by debate, and overcome by reason, lest we end up with fictive catholics out of those we had known as open heretics."⁶ At this stage in his engagement with Donatism, Augustine is willing to tolerate their divergent practice for the sake of future unity.

Strategic shifts. As theological dialogue proves less than immediately persuasive and roving bands of Donatist brigands (the Circumcellions) continue their depredations against catholic clergy and laity alike, Augustine begins to ratchet up the pressure he is willing to exert against the Donatists. Following his lead, the catholic bishops of North Africa agree to send an embassy to the imperial court asking to have the Donatists declared heretics rather than simply

⁵See Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J., " 'The Glue Itself Is Charity': Ps 62:9 in Augustine's Thought," in *Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum*, *Collectanea Augustiniana*, ed. Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J., Earl C. Muller, S.J., Roland J. Teske, S.J. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993) 375-84, for Augustine's use of *agglutinare*.

⁶Letter 93.17; cf. Letter 185.25.

schismatics, thereby making them liable to the civil penalties of the Theodosian laws against heresy; the delegation also seeks to have fines levied against Donatist bishops and clergy in whose districts acts of violence are committed against the catholic church. Their intention is to deter Donatism, reduce violence, and make it possible to teach catholic truth freely and for Donatists freely to embrace it. But the emissaries discover that, in reaction to an assault on the formerly Donatist but now Catholic Bishop of Bagai, a rescript had already been issued proscribing Donatism as a heresy rather than simply restraining it from violence. Commenting on these developments, Augustine credits "Christian mildness" with preventing the death penalty from being invoked against the heretics; instead, fines were imposed and Donatist bishops and clergy exiled.⁷

Conversions of Donatists followed in the wake of the Edict of Unity of 405. Some of these were genuine, some expedient. Of those who willingly joined the catholic church, some had long wanted to do so but were afraid of reprisals before the law provided them with some relief; others who had been Donatist more out of custom than conviction found catholic belief and practice acceptable and saw no reason to suffer the penalties of remaining in the Donatist church; still others simply followed their companions and clergy into the catholic community. More problematic were those who maintained their Donatist convictions but became catholics out of expediency. These were the *ficti*, the pseudoconverts that Augustine had once been wary of creating. Now, however, he finds that some of these pretend Catholics were undergoing a gradual but real conversion—the result, he says, of the new habit of hearing the truth preached.⁸ Still other Donatists persisted in their resistance or increased their acts of hostility. But Augustine argues that a remedy should not be abandoned because it does not work with the incurable and he claims that those who continue to attack the catholic church actually benefit it by arousing greater unity among its members.⁹

Shift in meaning of charity. There is a subtle shift in Augustine's understanding of charity as he comes to accept the use of coercive measures against the Donatists. Charity remains the source of the church's unity in the Holy Spirit, but now it allows for the coercion of both faith and community. Augustine justifies the religious violence of forced conversions on at least two grounds: it is for the good of those coerced, and it works. He argues that the application of force in the form of civil penalties against Donatists has good as its end since it desires

⁷Letter 185.25-26. See Frend, 261-74, for an account of the tumultuous events of 405ff. The Conference of Carthage in 411 was a juridical confrontation between catholic and Donatist bishops that resulted in the final suppression of Donatism; see Frend, 275-89, and Brown, 330-34.

⁸Letter 185.30; cf. Letter 93.2 and 93.17, where Augustine notes that he changed his mind on the use of coercion because of the "demonstrated facts" of conversions he had witnessed.

⁹See Letter 185.31 for resisters' unwitting benefits to the church; Letter 93.3 for continued use of a remedy.

their correction and aims to bring them to true life. Intention is what makes acts of coercion charitable. Augustine describes this corrective love variously as paternal, maternal, fraternal, even divine; it applies to madmen, those sick with fever, rebellious children and fractious servants.¹⁰ Sarah punishing the rebellious Hagar and Christ striking down Paul in order to convert him are scriptural examples of charitable violence that Augustine cites repeatedly.¹¹ But the centerpiece of these biblical justifications is the parable of the banquet and the unwilling guests (Luke 14:16-23 || Matt. 22:1-10).¹² When the invited guests excuse themselves, new guests are *compelled* to come into the banquet, which Augustine takes to signify, remarkably enough, the unity of Christ's body in the eucharist and in the "bond of peace."¹³

Shift in meaning of church. The shift in the practical meaning of charity gives rise to a corresponding shift in Augustine's understanding of the church. Previously he had included among the wheat and the tares that comprise the church both the sinful and the holy, those compromised during persecution and those not, the worthy and the unworthy ministers. He continues to maintain that the "Lord's grain" or the "Lord's wheat" will never be overwhelmed by chaff, although chaff is everywhere in the world and in the church.¹⁴ In this broad church the sacraments are valid and efficacious because of the grace of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit in the bonds of charity, unity and peace. Sacraments shared with sinners are valid and do not defile the recipient.¹⁵ He still insists that the wheat and tares cannot be separated until the end of the world, and his scorn for the Donatists' presumptuous claim to a church free of chaff is unabated.¹⁶ But after the 405 Edict of Unity, Augustine is willing to include in the church's embrace even those who do not want to be there. The *ficti*, the pre-

¹⁰Letter 185.7; cf. Letter 93.4.

¹¹For Sarah and Hagar, Letters 93.6 and 185.9; for Paul, Letters 93.5 and 185.23: "we have shown that Paul was compelled by Christ; therefore the church imitates her Lord in compelling them [the Donatists]."

¹²Letters 93.5; 185.24. In *Sermon* 112 (c. 411) on the Lucan text Augustine identifies the invited guests as the Jews and names the Gentiles as those "not only brought but even compelled"; the implicit application to the Donatists would be unmistakable in this context. PL 38, 643-648; ET by Edmund Will, O.P., *Sermons* III/4 (94A-147A), *The Works of Saint Augustine*, ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (Brooklyn NY: New City Press, 1992) 147-53.

¹³Letter 185.24.

¹⁴The metaphor of wheat and tares occurs repeatedly in Augustine's arguments, e.g., Letter 93.31-34: the "Lord's grain" is never overwhelmed, even when chaff seems to outnumber wheat; he also uses the metaphor of good and bad fishes swimming together "in the Lord's net" (93.34).

¹⁵For arguments that sacraments received in communion with sinners do not lose their validity, see Letters 185.43 and 93.36-40, where Augustine turns the Donatists' appeal to Cyprian against them; cf. *Baptism* 2.

¹⁶See Letter 93.31, 33 for the final winnowing at the end of the world.

tenders who once had represented a problem of authenticity for Augustine, now become instead manifestations of God's grace working mysteriously to transform their questionable motivations into genuine catholic faith. In his own way, Augustine is creating a vision of church in which the wheat is steadily overcoming the tares.

LEARNING FROM THE DONATIST CONTROVERSY

In learning to legitimate religious coercion as an act of charity, Augustine puts himself at odds with his own ecclesial praxis both before and after the Donatist controversy. The theological virtues are a useful lens through which to analyze the tensions created by Augustine's position on coercion because they figure prominently in many of his writings and are the explicit subject of a relatively late work, the *Enchiridion*. Later Christian appropriations of Augustine's views inherit these tensions and are susceptible to similar analysis.

Charity. Augustine's contention that it is a work of charity to compel Donatists to come into the Catholic church compromises his theological understanding of both charity and the human person created in God's image. Although the intention of religious coercion is the salvation of those who are being coerced, it is an assault on the dignity and agency of the human person. It is inherently violent and violating. Despite Augustine's arguments to the contrary, coercion is incompatible with the most basic meanings of love—whether love of neighbor or love of God, whether in the realm of theology or that of ordinary experience and common sense. Augustine's defense of coercion is strikingly at odds with his eloquent summation of charity in the *Enchiridion*:

All the divine commandments therefore are directed to love. . . . Every commandment has love for its aim. . . . But whatever is done either through fear of punishment or from some other carnal motive, and is not directed toward that love which the Holy Spirit spreads abroad in our hearts, is not done as it ought to be done, however it might seem. This charity, of course, is the love of God and of neighbor. . . .¹⁷

At the same time that religious coercion eviscerates the content of love, it sunders love from justice. The resulting chasm between ethics and faith is evident throughout much of the history of the church.¹⁸

¹⁷*Enchiridion* 121. *Enchiridion ad Laurentium*, ed. E. Evans, CCL 46 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1966) 49-114; ET by Louis A. Arand, S.S., *St. Augustine, Faith, Hope and Charity*, Ancient Christian Writers, no. 3 (Westminster MD: Newman Bookshop, 1947).

¹⁸The gulf between love and justice is evident in the much-quoted "Love, and do what you will" (*Dilige, et quod vis fac*) from *Homily 7.8* of the *Tractate on the Epistle of John*, written ca. 413, in which Augustine expounds on the just severity of charity when it has correction as its intent. *Tractatus in epistolam Joannis ad Parthos*, PL 35, 1977-2062; ET by H. Browne, revised by Joseph H. Myers, in *St. Augustin: Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, vol. 7 (1888;

Religious coercion as justified by Augustine relies on the power of the state for its execution. It is possible only when the church is in a position of social and political dominance and can appeal to the religious sensibilities of a *Christian* emperor and direct them against a particular social or religious group. The use of imperial force to effect religious conformity is an ironic variation on what Augustine would later refer to in the *City of God* as making use of the "peace of Babylon"—in this case, however, the ruler of Babylon is a Christian emperor. An imperial theology thus undergirds an increasingly imperial ecclesiology.¹⁹ The church can never engage in this kind of praxis when it is a powerless minority that must plead for religious toleration from the empire on the basis of reason and good will; it should never indulge in it when it is powerful. Augustine's strategy of religious coercion was effective only for a brief period; by his death in 430, the Vandals, who were not orthodox Christians but Arians, were laying siege to Hippo in their sweep across North Africa.

Faith. Once Augustine begins to demand adherence to a uniform standard of faith and practice, he turns away from personal engagement with his opponents and resorts to the impersonal use of force to compel religious assent. He stops stressing the faith that Donatists and catholics have in common, for instance, in contrast to the heretical Arians. He gives less emphasis to the baptism they share and more to their stubborn persistence in sin. He begins to insist that the Donatists must share with the catholics in the same church *now*—and be brought into it forcibly, if necessary, to receive the gifts of the Spirit's love. Augustine's unwillingness to persevere in theological dialogue with the Donatists reflects a lack of faith in the attractiveness of truth and finally of God. It is at odds with the person once set aflame for truth by reading Cicero's *Hortensius*, and later drawn up to the heights of wisdom while gazing out a window in Ostia.²⁰ It is as if he has lost confidence in the Spirit who leads into

repr.: Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1974) 459-529. Peter Brown argues that Augustine had formed his views on rebuke and correction over a period of twenty years "with scrupulous sensitivity and honesty," in "St. Augustine's Attitude to Religious Coercion," 277. See also John Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study in the Religion of St. Augustine*, rev. ed. (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1991) 142, on this phrase, and 214-16 on fear, love, and conversion.

¹⁹ Augustine is unapologetic about the catholics' appeal to the Christian emperor, which he relates to the example of King Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 3): see *Letters* 93.9 and 185.8. He regularly turns the Donatist complaint about the use of imperial power back on themselves by recalling their appeals to Constantine at the beginning of the schism: *Letters* 93.12-14; 185.6; 88.1-5. For making use of the peace of Babylon, see *City of God* 19.26; *De civitate Dei*, ed. B. Dombart and A. Kalb, CCL 47-48 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1955); ET by Henry Bettenson, *St. Augustine, City of God* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984).

²⁰ *Confessions* III.4; IX.10. *Confessiones*, ed. Lucas Verheijen, following M. Skutella, CCL 27 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1981); ET by Henry Chadwick, *St. Augustine, Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

all truth, and so he begins to act out of fear—fear for the church, fear of losing catholic believers, fear even for the Donatists' salvation. Acting more from fear than faith, Augustine chooses the immediacy of coerced results rather than trusting in the slower and less visible processes of conversation and conversion.

Hope. Augustine's willingness to compel religious belief—or at least the appearance of belief—is problematic in other ways as well. Once he abandons his instinctive hesitation about the dangers of sham conversions, Augustine transforms his real surprise at the genuine conversions of some *ficti* into a more or less normative narrative. What was at first for him a regrettable but necessary situation of coercion becomes instead a model of grace as some of the pretenders become genuine catholics. Yet it is a model of grace surprisingly lacking in hope. It relies on duress, not patience; on human calculation, not divine providence; it presumes to know God's mind and seeks to force God's hand. Such a view stands in sharp contrast to Augustine's meditations in the *Confessions*, in which he praises and thanks God for the mysterious workings of providence in his life while also acknowledging that it is only possible to recognize the circumstances of grace retrospectively. His justification of religious coercion, however, presumes that providence can be apprehended prospectively and that the conditions for grace can be created and controlled.

Without the long arm of the state to compel at least outward religious conformity, Augustine might have come to different conclusions about religious coercion and how to respond to the seeming intractability of error, the hiddenness of human motivations, and the difficulty of discerning the meaning of external events. He might have reached conclusions more akin, perhaps, to the wider perspectives he generally takes in the *Confessions*, on the one hand, or the *City of God* and the *Enchiridion*, on the other, works that bracket the Donatist controversy chronologically. Perhaps later Christian tradition might have learned different lessons from Augustine as well.

DEVELOPING THE PRAXIS OF ECCLESIOLOGY

In addition to the pitfalls just marked, the critical tensions generated by Augustine's praxis during the Donatist controversy point to some roads half-taken that still hold promise for the continuing development of ecclesiological praxis today. Three paths in particular are worth pursuing.

The church of wheat and tares. In distinction to the purist ecclesiology of Donatism, Roman Catholicism has traditionally embraced both the image and the praxis of a church of wheat and tares. In its sacramental life, its pastoral care, and its multiple traditions of spirituality, the Roman Catholic Church has always welcomed sinners and offered us—all of us—ways to grow beyond our limitations and pursue the call to holiness. While confessing this church to be holy as

well as catholic, apostolic and one, we have usually spoken with realism and humility, acknowledging that the church's perfect holiness is yet to be revealed.²¹

Today, however, this characteristic Catholic inclusiveness and generosity has become suspect, hemmed in by the same constraints of zeal and fear as was Augustine in his dealings with the Donatists. Investigations of theologians anonymously accused of falling short of norms of doctrinal literalism are one manifestation of this fear. The current Roman zeal for exacting doctrinal uniformity and excluding unworthy voices represents, somewhat ironically, a kind of Donatist purism that sweeps away the chaff *now* rather than waiting for God's good time. In its claims to perfectionism of doctrinal knowing, such ecclesiological praxis tends to conflate doctrine and faith, history and eschatology, narrowing the horizons of both. Augustine's warning in the *Enchiridion* is all the more poignant in face of this tendency: "neither the whole church nor any part of it [i.e., dwelling on earth or in eternity], wishes to be worshiped instead of God, or to be God to anyone belonging to the temple of God. . . ." ²²

In our own context, Augustine's experience can remind us that the church of wheat and tares must really be a church for *all* of us. As our praxis of ecclesiology continues to develop, the church of wheat and tares today would not simply tolerate but actually welcome pluralism, difference and dialogue. It would learn the grace of trusting the process and relying on the attractiveness of God. It would value encounter and openness as the way to truth. To live in the church of wheat and tares requires continual growth in charity. Because our knowledge is incomplete and our vision limited, charity demands both epistemological and eschatological humility. To live in this church of wheat and tares is to dwell on God's threshing floor and hope that on the day of winnowing *all* shall be wheat.

Development of doctrine and the reign of God. In *Jesus the Liberator* Jon Sobrino poses a question about the development of christological doctrine that can help clarify our thought about the praxis of ecclesiology. From the perspective and starting point of Latin American christology, Sobrino reflects on the "double relatedness of Jesus"—to the Father and to the kingdom of God (45, 67ff).²³ Without doing either a complete exposition or defense of Sobrino's argument, I want to focus on its heuristic implications in regard to charity, praxis and faith. Sobrino observes that the classical development of doctrine has concentrated on only one side of Jesus' double relatedness, namely his relationship to the Father. The trinitarian and christological doctrines of Nicaea and Chalcedon evolved from the desires and disputes that strove to understand how God and humanity could be so intimately related. Although hard-won and enduring in its

²¹In *Letter* 185.38 Augustine notes that the whole church will be without spot or wrinkle only at the end, when death no longer wields the sting of sin.

²²*Enchiridion* 56.

²³Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1998). See 45, 67-103, for Jesus' "double relatedness" and Sobrino's exposition of the kingdom of God in the mission and faith of Jesus.

own right, this one-sided doctrinal development has led to what I would argue is a recurrent tendency to take the classical trinitarian and christological doctrines as the sole measure of faith. Faith in doctrinal propositions then becomes the prime ecclesiological virtue and relegates praxis to the periphery of Christian life.

Another path of development is possible if we take Sobrino's lead and ask about Jesus' relationship to the kingdom of God. Following this path would not supplant but supplement the classical development of doctrine and contribute to developing the praxis of ecclesiology. It would also pick up some Augustinian themes that have fallen by the wayside over time. Pursuing this course might also offer a corrective to the narrow defense of doctrine that preoccupies so much of the leadership of the Catholic church today.

Developing the doctrine of Jesus' relationship to the reign of God would refocus faith through the lens of praxis. Faith would reflect on Jesus' ministry and mission in light of God's coming reign and then act on the imperatives of the kingdom. Both Augustine and Sobrino recognize the constraints of history and the dangers of mistaking either the church or any political institution for the kingdom of God. Yet they also affirm the necessity of continuing to make God's love and justice present in the flesh. As Augustine observes in the *City of God*, a people can be known by the objects of its love, and a righteous people (the church, for instance), just like a righteous individual, "lives on the . . . basis of faith active in love."²⁴ Justice is the norm of love and peace its offspring.²⁵ Developing the doctrine of Jesus' relationship to the reign of God would enable us to connect the rich tradition of the church's social teaching to classical doctrine and theology from which it has largely been isolated. Then, alongside the well-formed desire of faith seeking understanding, its overshadowed sibling would be able to grow with renewed vigor: the desire of *faith seeking praxis*.

Charity as the preeminent ecclesiological virtue. Ecclesiology, "the doctrine of the church," is not just doctrine *about* the church and not just doctrine *belonging to* the church. Rather, it is the very *life* of the church, of that people which loves God, confesses Jesus Christ, and carries forward his mission of proclaiming God's reign. Praxis is the dynamic and reciprocal relationship of action and reflection, the ongoing, historical embodiment of justice, love and faith. Developing the praxis of ecclesiology in the light of Jesus' relationship to the reign of God would remind us that doctrine is always at the service of love and justice. Cyprian took this view when he persevered in communion with the Roman church; Augustine maintained it when he recognized the validity of Donatist baptism and commended Cyprian's practice of charity. To take that view today would involve embodying faith active in love *within* the life of the

²⁴*City of God* 19.23 (890). See 19.24 for the alternative definition of a people as known by the objects of its love.

²⁵See *City of God* 19.11: "It follows that we could say of peace, as we have said of eternal life, that it is the final fulfillment of all our goods . . ." (865); also 19.21-24.

church as much as in its mission to "the world." The tensions in Augustine's own ecclesiological praxis as well as in the present ecclesial climate of the Roman Catholic Church make his observations in the *Enchiridion* particularly telling: "When the question arises as to whether a person is good, one does not ask what he believes, or what he hopes, but what he loves. For without a doubt, one who loves rightly also believes and hopes rightly. In truth, one who does not love believes in vain, even if what he believes in is true; he hopes in vain, even if what he hopes in has to do with true happiness. . . ."²⁶

If faith seeking praxis finds its end in love, charity is the preeminent ecclesiological virtue. Faith is foundational but charity is formative. The love of God poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5) is the transformative gift of grace. As Augustine never tired of asserting in controversy with Pelagius, it is this love that sanctifies and ultimately saves the believer through the grace of Jesus Christ. Faith is confidence in this gift and in its gracious giver. Faith formed by charity moves both the individual and the ecclesial community to action on behalf of God's reign. Trust nurtured by love overflows into love of neighbor as the concrete expression of the love of God. Hope draws us on toward the reign of God that is ever before us yet already present among us.

The perfection of charity is eschatological, but its practice is deeply historical and profoundly communal. It always tends toward that perfect love that casts out fear (1 John 4:18). Charity is *the* ecclesiological virtue because it is the bridge that joins history and hope. It is also *the* theological virtue for, in the end, as Paul, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas all knew, it is only charity that endures. We will still live in charity when faith has been transformed into the vision of God and hope is fulfilled by life in God's presence. What better reason for living in charity now—especially in the church?

FRANCINE CARDMAN

Weston Jesuit School of Theology
Cambridge, Massachusetts

²⁶*Enchiridion* 117 (135).