CHAPTER FOUR

AUGUSTINE’S SERMONES 29
AND 29A ON PS. 117, 1 (118, 1)
TWO EARLY CARTHAGINIAN SERMONES AD POPULUM
ON THE MEANING OF CONFESSION DURING
THE VIGIL OF PENTECOST?

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The present contribution offers a reading of two of Augustine’s sermones ad populum traditionally associated with the liturgical period around Pentecost during his stay in Carthage in 397, namely sermones 29 and 29A. In the first part of the article we will focus on this specific visit to Carthage. We will then offer a succinct status quaestionis on Augustine’s Pentecost homilies. The third part discusses two specific homilies, sermones 29 and 29A, which are in the secondary literature connected with the feast of Pentecost. Each sermon first is introduced by placing it in its historical and chronological framework, making the link with the first part of the article on Augustine’s Carthaginian visit of 397. In a second movement we let the preacher speak for himself, as it were, in sermones 29 and 29A. We concisely summarize the content of each sermon. Thirdly, this content will be evaluated regarding its connection with the Pentecost theme (making the link with the status quaestionis on the Pentecost sermons), Augustine’s homiletic style and methodology, and the audience that likely attended this sermon.

1. Augustine in Carthage in 397

This first chapter offers an overview of the available historical data concerning Augustine’s travel to Carthage in 397 and his homiletic activities during this period in which sermones 29 and 29A are situated.

O. Perler’s inventory places Augustine in Carthage no less than sixteen times in the period from 397 to 419. His visits tended for the most part to be fairly lengthy and generally took place either shortly before the summer, during the summer itself, or in the early autumn. Late autumn
and winter were usually spent in his cathedral city, where he would have celebrated the feasts of Christmas and Easter. Wherever he was, however, he never missed the opportunity to preach, and his time in Carthage is no exception in this regard. It would appear that Augustine travelled less after 419.¹ According to Perler, he probably visited Carthage for the last time in 424.²

As a priest, Augustine attended a meeting of the African bishops in Carthage in 394, chaired by Aurelius of Carthage.³ In 397, he spent roughly five months in the city, this time as a bishop,⁴ and participated in two local ecclesial meetings.⁵ Easter 397 fell on April 5th and Augustine probably left for Carthage after the Easter octave, arriving in the third or fourth week of April. A synod of the ecclesial province of Carthage took place in the city on Friday June 26th 397 under the leadership of bishop Aurelius. Although Hippo was part of the ecclesial province of Numidia and did not belong to the province of Carthage, Augustine probably attended the provincial synod as advisor to his good friend Aurelius.⁶ It is possible that the synod in question was intended as preparation for the general African council that was to take place in Carthage later the same year. The council in question was chaired by Aurelius of Carthage on August 28th and was held in the secretarium of the Basilica Restituta.⁷

⁶ The only canon to have been preserved from the synod forbade the bishops of Carthage from making overseas journeys without the permission of their primate. The purpose of the prohibition was to prevent the Carthaginian bishops from appealing constantly to the bishop of Rome or the court of the emperor. Lancel, Saint Augustin, pp. 278–279. Perler, Les voyages de Saint Augustin, pp. 218–220.
⁷ The council started by approving the Breviarium of decisions made during the general council of Hippo in 395. “Le Brev. Hippon. constitue le noyau substantiel de la législation canonique africaine à l’époque d’A. La plupart de ses dispositions concernent la discipline du clergé et la vie liturgique des communautés; elles attestent la volonté de l’épiscopat catholique, soumis aux critiques des donatistes, de posséder un clergé digne et consciencieux.” Some examples of the measures taken and decisions made in