CHAPTER FIVE

‘PRACTICING WHAT HE HAD TAUGHT’:
AUGUSTINE’S SERMONS ON CYPRIAN

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Among Augustine’s predecessors, Cyprian occupies a prominent place. Alongside Ambrose, he is the Church Father whom Augustine most often mentions by name, and it is clear that Augustine was thoroughly acquainted with Cyprian’s works and held them in great esteem, considering Cyprian himself a man of indisputable authority.¹ He brings forward Cyprian’s testimony not only in his debates with the Donatists and Pelaginians,² but also in various practical matters. For instance, the 3rd century bishop is adduced as an example for the legitimacy of using true pagan knowledge in Christian teaching.³ On a more theoretical level, Cyprian has been a major influence upon Augustine’s thought about auctoritas.⁴ Finally, as an exemplary martyr, Cyprian must have been a source of public pride in Augustine’s Africa and of personal inspiration to Augustine himself.

Augustine’s admiration for Cyprian can perhaps best be seen in the numerous sermons that he delivered on the yearly occasion of Cyprian’s feast on September, 14th.⁵ It may be interesting to have a closer look at the image of Cyprian as it is conveyed by these various sermons. What

³ Doctr.Chr. 2,146.
⁵ As Augustine himself explains in S.310,1, a saint’s feast concerns his or her ‘day of birth’ (natalis), that is, the day of earthly death.
aspects of Cyprian’s life and work are highlighted? Can we detect any form of doubt or discussion with regard to Cyprian? To what extent does Augustine repeat himself in his yearly praise of the martyr and where does he try to find new, creative ways of expressing himself?

Such questions seem particularly relevant in the light of the exciting new find of six sermons by Augustine at Erfurt library, which were recently edited in *Wiener Studien.* One of these newly found texts is a sermon by Augustine about Cyprian, which was hitherto unknown. Until its publication, the corpus of Augustinian sermons about Cyprian counted eleven texts.

Apart from the twelve sermons presently available, Augustine must have preached about Cyprian many more times, given the fact that he preached in North Africa for nearly forty years. Cyprian’s feast was a highlight in the ecclesiastical year, and an important mark on the calendar. It seems to have been generally celebrated by the people, not only in church but also out on the street with noisy forms of spectacle. Augustine himself, in one of the Cyprian sermons, complains about ecstatic dancing and singing during mass, as it was common in earlier days, before it was officially ruled out. The feast therefore reminds somewhat of Christmas as it is now generally celebrated in many modern western countries. As Augustine not infrequently preached more than once on such an important day, this leaves us with the possibility that the total number of his sermons about Cyprian may have counted anything between thirty or forty and well over a hundred.

Even if one assumes such high numbers of unrecorded or lost Augustinian sermons, the twelve extant texts still form a considerable corpus, and some general lines may well be discerned. I will start by analyzing the new *S. 313G* and compare it with the eleven other sermons. As a ref-

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8 *Sermones* 309, 310, 311, 312, 313, 313A, 313B, 313C, 313D, 313E and 313F. The new Erfurt sermon is hence numbered as *313G*; cf. Schiller a.o. 2008, 229. The sermons on Cyprian have only rarely been studied as a whole; cf. only Robert T. Brown, *A study of the five sermons of St. Augustine on St. Cyprian the martyr,* Dissertation (Los Angeles 1948).

9 S. 311,5.

10 This number is, of course, a rough estimate, for which no proof can be adduced. In addition, one may point out that other ancient Christian authors too preached about Cyprian. Some extant examples are listed in Schiller a.o. 2008, n. 99.