CHAPTER ELEVEN

TRACES OF AUGUSTINIAN ‘GNOSIS’ IN JULIANUS POMERIUS’ DE VITA CONTEMPLATIVA

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1. Introduction: Julianus Pomerius and his De vita contemplativa

Not much is known about the life of Julianus Pomerius. The only two primary sources that say something about his life, are De viris illustribus of Isidorus Hispalensis\(^1\) and the De scriptoribus ecclesiasticis of Gennadius.\(^2\) Both these sources only offer cryptic details and no specific date can be linked to his life. Pomerius moved from Mauretania to Gallia at the end of the fifth century, probably to escape the consequences of the attacks of the Vandals.\(^3\) This must have been before 484, because that is the year in which Gunthamund, who was more tolerant of the church, came to rule.\(^4\) The only date that can be linked to Pomerius’ life with certainty is 497, the year that Caesarius (the later bishop of Arles) became a pupil in Pomerius’ school for rhetoric in Arles for a short time.\(^5\) According to Gennadius, Pomerius was ordained as priest in Gaul.\(^6\) He already enjoyed considerable respect in his own lifetime: Bishop Ruricius asked him on several occasions to move to Limoges,\(^7\) and Ennodius (the later bishop of Pavia) in turn tried to convince him to establish himself in Italy.\(^8\) C.F.A. Arnold\(^9\)

\(^1\) De vir. ill. XXV (PL 83:1096).
\(^2\) De script. eccl. XC (PL 58:1117–1118).
\(^3\) C.F.A. Arnold, Caesarius von Arelate und die Gallische Kirche seiner Zeit (Leipzig, 1894) 84.
\(^5\) See vit. Caes. 1,8 (PL 67:1004).
\(^6\) De script. eccl. XC VIII (PL 58:1117).
\(^7\) Ep. XVII (PL 58:79–80).
\(^8\) Ep. VI (PL 63:39–40).
\(^9\) Arnold, Caesarius von Arelate, 82.
is of the opinion that Pomerius was once head of a monastery in North Africa, and that he at one stage or the other after having established himself in Gaul, became head of a monastery near Arles. In 499 Caesarius ‘after the death of the abbot’ became head of this monastery. If this abbot was Pomerius, it means that he died somewhere around the year 500.

Pomerius wrote four works: De anima et qualitate eius, De virginibus instituendis, De contemptu mundi et rerum transiturarum and De vita contemplativa. However, the last mentioned work is the only one that survived in its entirety. It was probably written after he had become a priest. This was the first manuscript on Christian spirituality with this title and was highly regarded until late in the Middle Ages. It consists of three books with 25, 24 and 34 chapters respectively. The work describes the ideals of a contemplative and an active life and also includes a discussion of virtues and vices. The first two books are addressed to bishops and the third to believers in general.

2. Julianus Pomerius and Augustine

It is generally accepted that Pomerius and Caesarius of Arles were greatly responsible for the preservation and appreciation of the works of Augustine in the Western Church. The importance of De vita contemplativa precisely lies in the fact that it gives one an idea of how Augustine was interpreted in those times. Pomerius makes no secret of his boundless awe for Augustine and he also states clearly in this work that he follows Augustine:

The holy bishop Augustine, keen in mind, charming in eloquence, skilled in human learning, zealous in ecclesiastical labors, celebrated in daily disputations, self-possessed in his every action, Catholic in his exposition of our faith, penetrating in the solution of problems, prudent in the refutation of heretics, and wise in explaining the canonical writings—he, I say, whom I have followed in these little books to the best of my ability …

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11 Julianus Pomerius, The contemplative life, 8.
13 Julianus Pomerius. The contemplative life, 3.
15 De vit. cont. III.31.6 (PL 59:517): ‘Sanctus Augustinus episcopus, acer ingenio, suavis