A FINE LINE? CATHOLICS AND DONATISTS IN ROMAN NORTH AFRICA

ALEXANDER EVERS

I. Introduction

On the 1st of June of the year 411 AD, bishops from all over Roman North Africa gathered together in the main hall of the Baths of Gargilius at Carthage, right in the centre of the city, as Augustine of Hippo pointed out—in urbe media.¹ They were divided in two camps: on the one side 286 Catholic bishops were present, on the other 285 Donatist. The Emperor Honorius had called for this council, in order to find the Donatists guilty of schism and to deliver a final blow to the movement, which had started a hundred years earlier. The verbatim records of the meeting were meticulously written down and have been carefully preserved, thus being by far the most valuable literary source, providing an almost complete record of the African episcopal sees—on both sides of the dividing line—at the beginning of the fifth century.

¹ First of all I would like to express my gratitude to Olivier Hekster and Ted Kaizer for organising this colloquium on Frontiers in the Roman World, and for allowing me to speak on mostly imaginary boundaries—the dividing lines between two parties within an entity that at the time was perhaps also only separated from its surrounding world in the "imagination of their hearts": the Church within the Roman Empire. I am very grateful to Averil Cameron, Robert Dodaro o.s.a., Alan Fitzgerald o.s.a., Peter Garnsey, Paul van Geest, Claude Lepelley, Fergus Millar, Simon Price, Bryan Ward-Perkins, and Greg Woolf for providing directions and sharing opinions. Alan Dearn has been particularly kind in sending me some of his own material on Donatist martyr stories and the archaeology of Roman Africa from his Oxford DPhil thesis, The Polemical Use of the Past in the Catholic/Donatist Schism (2003). Also, in his article "The Abitinian martyrs and the outbreak of the Donatist schism", Journal of Ecclesiastical History 55.1 (2004), 1–18, he argues how texts are used to create divisions, even centuries after the actual events.

The development of the Christian Church in Roman Africa during the fourth and fifth centuries was greatly influenced by the issue of Donatism. In a relatively short period of time this division within the Church, largely a direct result of the persecutions of the Emperor Diocletian, developed into an effectively organised movement: an independent Church, with its own bishops, other clergy, and an ever growing, flourishing faithful flock. Our knowledge of the schism is largely limited and unilateral, and mostly determined by the works of Catholic writers against the party of Donatus, thus creating more than a fine line. As Barnes already indicated: “the early history of the Donatist schism is known almost exclusively from documents quoted by Eusebius, and from documents which Optatus and Augustine used in their polemical works against the Donatists”.\(^2\) Augustine, of course, can be regarded as the champion of virtually everything, being one of the most influential figures of the Latin Church in the West, as well as the Church in general. But when it comes to being a relevant source regarding the Donatist issue, Optatus is equally important. As bishop of Milevis in Numidia during the second half of the fourth century, he was the pronounced predecessor of Augustine in his battle against the Donatists, and possibly set the tone for the decades to come. Extremely little is known about and of him, as only his treatise known as *Contra Parmecianum* has survived throughout the ages—a highly polemical work divided into seven books, addressing Parmenian, the Donatist bishop of Carthage at the time. Of great, perhaps even greater, historical importance is the dossier of contemporary documents, which Optatus had collected and used as a reference to support his own arguments, such as the *Acta purgationis Felicis* (AD 315) and the *Gesta apud Zenophilum* (AD 320).

When talking about the Donatists and the Donatist Church, it is important to reflect on definitions. Shaw reckons that modern-day historians have consistently labelled the movement as Donatism, but unjustifiably so. For the “sake of convenience”, historians and also theologians have deluded themselves by exploiting the past mostly for present ideological purposes. The existing records were obviously biased towards “those” people, and referred to them as “Donatists”. But then these records were almost without exception written by members of the “winning” Catholic side. And so ever since the battle was fought hegemonic domination has severely influenced labelling these “African Chris-