Matthew Alan Gaumer


Augustine as is well known returned to Africa in 388, and re-joined the catechumenate of St Monica’s church, being ordained presbyter in 392, with if not a rejection of his earlier Manichaeism certainly a reformulation of this in Catholic terms that reduced it to near invisibility in his thinking. But the Catholic Church of St Monica was a minority church in North Africa, despite its communion with the *orbis terrarum*, in contrast with the majority communion of the Donatists who were deeply imbedded in the tradition of North African Christianity. The authority of Cyprian was claimed by both sides. Gaumer’s objective is to assess the use of Cyprian’s ecclesiological position by Augustine in defence of Catholic Christianity, emphasising the social dimension to the dispute in terms of a claim to *Africanitas* (x and pp. 3–7) on both sides.

At first sight this seems a tall order particularly in terms of Donatism on which Gaumer focuses, promising us a more exhaustive treatment pending a further book on the more cursorily treated Pelagianism (p. 8). Although appeal might be had to Cyprian’s *De Unitate* in defense of Augustine’s claim that *securus iudicat orbis terrarum*, on baptism (that could never be ‘rebaptism’ *extra ecclesiam*) and ordination, Cyprian might nevertheless seem a natural supporter of the Donatist position on a rigorously exclusive church.

We may expound Gaumer’s resolution of this problem with reference to his analysis of Augustine’s argument in his *Contra epistulam Parmeniani*, dated around AD 400. Cyprian is constantly named, and his view on reconciling the lapsed quoted, against the denial of the ‘mixed’ church, and his views on unity against separation (pp. 103–110). Gaumer’s persuasive argument is that Augustine as patrician and Roman is considered an outsider by African Catholics so that he begins tentatively by emphasizing Cyprian’s martyrdom as anchored in
African tradition and patrimony (pp. 69–73). In this he contrasts with Optatus of Milevis’s sparse and less than warm use of Cyprian who nevertheless advocates a doctrine of global authority against those who patently have broken from it (pp. 58–62). It is in Contra Epistulam Parmeniani, 3.24 that Augustine proclaims his “securus iudicat…”

But on the subject of (re)baptism, Cyprian seems far more on the Donatist side, with their claims beatissimi martyris Cypriani auctoritate (De Baptismate 1.1 [p. 108]), “situating himself into the African psyche through an unambiguous affiliation with their most popular hero” (p. 109). Since Cyprian worked before the decree of the universal council of Nicaea, his policy was guided by the need for pax et unitas and God had withheld the real doctrine from him in order to create in him an icon of unity (pp. 109–110). The Donatists’ persistence is an indication of their ‘pride’ and not of Cyprianic ‘humility’ (p. 113). Cyprian’s sacramentum unitatis is a uinculum caritatis: without caritas the loveless and factitious Donatists cannot claim a true, Catholic unitas from which to exclude others. Thus they can be wrong on baptism and Cyprian dissociated from their error.

Thus Gaumer can claim that Augustine’s method was a rhetorical devise seeking a forced conceptual harmonization of key Cyprianic concepts on unity into a conceptual pattern whose logical interrelationship legitimated the overthrow of his clear views on (re)baptism. There was no logical connection between Stephen’s view on not rebaptising schismatics and Cyprian’s extra ecclesiam nulla salus. Thus Augustine’s assumption was mistaken: Cyprian’s view was not coherent with his own: baptism, like ordination outside the Church was valid and not to be repeated but had no salvific efficacy but was simply a ‘military branding (nota militaris)’ (p. 141). In my Cyprian and Roman Carthage (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 297–307 I hypothesized that the anonymous De Rebaptismate published amongst Cyprian’s Spuria did in fact represent the kind of theological argument on which Stephen relied. Prescinding from the far later principle of ex opere operato, I argued that Stephen’s group was relying on a theology of the efficacy of the ‘power of the name’ once uttered. I wonder if Augustine could be shown to being engaging with and seeking some degree of compromise with that kind of specifically theological resource for his claim rather than his forced rhetorical reconstruction?

Gaumer now turns somewhat more briefly to Augustine’s campaign against Pelagius. Cyprian’s absolution of the penitent lapsed has opened the way to elaborate a doctrine of grace against those who claim a perfection achieved by their own merits: there needs to be a reconciliation of flesh and spirit, for good Pauline reasons (pp. 242–243). Julian of Eclanum had maintained that the doctrine of original sin, to him regrettably almost universal in the West,