TERTULLIAN'S ARGUMENTATION IN
DE PRAESRIPTIONE HAERETICORUM 20,1ff.

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Tertullian's *De praescriptione haereticorum* does not cease to arouse the interest of the scholarly world. Not to mention other problems, up to this day the dispute continues about the important term *praescriptione*: has it a juridical background, as Mr. Michaélidès maintains, in accordance with many previous commentators,1 or is it a more general term of argumentation and discussion, as Mr. Fredouille thinks?2 In view of this and other disagreements we may foresee for some time to come the continuing of the discussions on Tertullian's treatise. In those discussions inevitably will keep coming up questions concerning the interpretation of chapter 20ff., as this section of the work, in particular the end of chapter 21, still has not yielded all its secrets. In the next pages a cautious attempt will be made to outline the course of the argumentation from 20,1 onward and, within this cadre, to establish more specifically the exact meaning of the last paragraphs of chapter 21.3

Tertullian starts by alluding to a number of doctrinal points concerning

2 J.-Cl. Fredouille, *Tertullien et la conversion de la culture antique* (Paris 1972) 195-234. In the course of his exposé Mr. Fredouille also discusses the related problem of the exact title of Tertullian's treatise: instead of the traditional *De praescriptione haereticorum* he proposes *De praescriptionibus adversus haereses omnes*; see 228ff.
3 In Refoulé's edition 21,6-7; cfr. R. Refoulé, *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Opera* I, Corpus Christianorum, series Latina 1 (Turnholti 1954) 203. In Kroymann 21,6-7 constitutes the first part of 22,1; the second half of 22,1 coincides with Refoulé's 22,1; cfr. Aem.Kroymann, *Quinti Septimi Florentis Tertulliani Opera* II, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 70 (Vindobonae et Lipsiae 1942) 25. The difference certainly has something to do with a divergence of interpretation: is *superest ergo uti demonstremus* (21,6; 22,1 in Kroymann) a conclusion resulting from, and therefore linked with, the foregoing, or is it the beginning of a new phase in the argumentation? Kroymann's arrangement of the text presupposes the second opinion. In my view, as will appear further on, Refoulé's arrangement is preferable.
God, the Son and the Son’s mission. It is a repetition per summa capita of chapter 13, where the regula fidei of the orthodox church had been described. This regula contains the essential elements of the catholic faith: the existence of only one God, the mission of the Son, who preached the faith and announced the kingdom of heaven, who was put to death and rose from the grave, who sent the Spirit, and who one day will come to bestow on the elected eternal life and the promised heavenly things. The main points of this regula, then, are reproduced here but, the context now being a context of discussion, their truth is left in suspension not to contravene the rules of logic: Christus Iesus, dominus noster, permittat dicere interim, quisquis est, cuiuscumque dei filius, cuiuscumque materiae homo et deus, cuiuscumque fidei praeceptor, cuiuscumque mercedis re-promissor. It must be noted, for that matter, that in chapter 20ff. concrete doctrinal points as such are not the object of Tertullian’s demonstration. In accordance with the general plan of his work he seeks the justification of the catholic faith by tracing it back to its origin, not by discussing its contents. The allusions of 20,1, therefore, are more or less accidental, provoked by the recollection of the regula fidei from chapter 13, but couched in such a way as to demonstrate the author’s impartiality at the start of his argumentation.

In 20,2 this argumentation begins properly. It starts with an exposé of mainly historical character, presenting the facts the demonstration has to rely on. In broad outline the exposé (20,2–9) is as follows:

Christ entrusted the doctrine of faith, inhering in his mission, to the apostles; the apostles, in their turn, promulgated it in the face of the Jewish and heathen world by founding communities and assigning them as depositaries of this doctrine, the apostolic churches. These churches have handed and still do hand it over to new communities, which by receiving it became and become apostolic churches themselves. So, all churches are, in fact, one apostolic church; they form a brotherhood and live in communion with one another on the basis of the one faith handed down from the apostles.

These facts being established, Tertullian proceeds to draw up a twofold claim, which claim, in its turn, will prepare the way for the proof that only the catholic faith is in possession of the truth. We use the word ‘claim’ to render Tertullian’s praescriptio—praescribere: (21,1) Hinc igitur dirigimus praescriptionem: si dominus Christus Iesus apostolos misit ad praedicandum, alios non esse recipiendos praedicatorum quam Christus instituit ...; (21,3)