

Summary of Readings

In these letters between Augustine and three civil authorities who claimed Christ, Augustine directs how he, as a Bishop, believes their authority should be exercised as Christians.

Authors and Recipients

- **Augustine.** The Bishop of Hippo, and an influential thinker in the development of Christian theology and Western philosophy. In addition to many other contributions, Augustine is known for articulating the theory of “just war” and the Christian belief in predestination.
- **Donatus.** From the reading: “Proconsul of Africa in 408. He had been charged by the emperor Honorius with enforcing the severe laws against the Donatists promulgated along with the Edict of Unity (405) and in subsequent edicts. Augustine wrote imploring him not to impose the death penalty against the Donatists (cf. Letter 100). He was a devout Catholic and a property owner at Hippo Regius.”
- **Marcellinus of Carthage.** From Wikipedia, Marcellinus was the secretary of state of the Western Roman Empire under Roman emperor Honorius and a close friend of Augustine of Hippo. In the context of this correspondence he is presiding over the murder trial of Donatists accused of killing a priest and maiming another. The reading offers this additional information: “a tribune (commander of a military regiment) and notary (a high-ranking official of the imperial chancery charged with various tasks concerning the maintenance of public order). He was a Catholic and a friend of A. who wrote him six letters and dedicated three works to him. He was appointed by the emperor Honorius to preside over the conference of Carthage, which was convened in June 411.”
- **Macedonius.** The imperial vicar of Africa (and thus a judge). Augustine reflects on the goals of the government punishment of criminals.

Readings

All of the readings are available in *Augustine: Political Writings*:

- Letter 100, Augustine to Donatus.
- Letter 133, Augustine to Marcellinus.
- Letter 139, Augustine to Marcellinus.
- Letters 152, 153, 154, 155. Macedonius to Augustine, Augustine to Macedonius.

Letter 100, To Donatus

In the letter from Augustine to Donatus, Augustine addresses how his friend should exercise his power as an authority in a trial of a set of Donatists charged with violating a Roman law that had outlawed them. (Their sect is, confusingly, named after another Donatus from many years before). The Donatists opposed allowing those who had betrayed the faith during earlier persecution from re-administering sacraments or taking leadership roles in the church and there sect was also involved with North Africans who held an anti-Roman sentiment. The

reading offers extended details, and this particular section is useful for understanding the background to this letter:

“By the turn of the fifth century, the Donatists were openly opposing the Roman occupation of north Africa. At the same time, they were weakened by internal tensions. The Catholic bishops seized the opportunity to appeal for support against them to the emperor Honorius. In 405, Honorius issued the Edict of Unity, which outlawed the Donatists by prohibiting their assemblies, confiscating their places of meeting, and threatening their clergy with exile. However, the imposition of these and subsequent laws still failed to bring peace. In June 411, a council of more than 500 bishops, Donatist and Catholic, met at Carthage under the presidency of Marcellinus, a lay imperial official and Catholic, eventually a close friend of Augustine’s. Augustine played an important role in the debates, which covered both the history of the dispute and the resulting theological disagreements. Finally, and to no one’s surprise, Marcellinus ruled in favour of the Catholics, thus reinforcing the existing legislation against their opponents.”

Note that this letter contains the most fantastic phrase “My honoured and dearest son, it is no trivial or negligible request that we make of you, to avoid killing those for whose reform we are petitioning the Lord.”

The Letters to Marcellinus

Augustine writes to Marcellinus, the brother of the proconsul of Africa (Apringius), urging mercy for the Donatists who have been convicted of the murder and mutilation respectively of two Catholic priests.

The best phrase of these letters may be found in 133, where Augustine says “Do not abandon the fatherly care that you maintained in the investigation itself. Then you dragged from them a confession of their outrages without stretching them on the rack or scoring them with hooks, or burning them with flames, **but only beating them. That is a method of constraint that the teachers of the liberal arts use, and parents themselves.** It is not infrequently employed even by bishops in their courts. Therefore do not punish too fiercely something you investigated rather gently.”

The Letters between Macedonius and Augustine

This exchange of letters with Macedonius, vicar of Africa, includes Augustine’s most extensive reflection on punishment (from *Augustine: Political Writings*).

Some Background

Donatist Controversy

Donatus Magnus was the leader (remember, different than the Donatus that Augustine is addressing), but not founder, of a schismatic sect eventually known as the Donatists. In short,

they opposed allowing those who had betrayed the faith during earlier persecution from re-administering sacraments or taking leadership roles in the church. This led to a battle between the North African sect (Donatus claimed the role of “Bishop of Carthage and Primate of North Africa” while it was held by another) and the Catholic church. The Catholic church – and Augustine – believed (1) that “traitors” could be forgiven (in modern language, the church is for sinners, not for saints) and that (2) the effectiveness of the sacraments was not based on the holiness of the administrator. For more information, see articles such as this one (<http://www.earlychristianhistory.net/donatus.html>), read the introduction in the PDF titled “The Donatist controversy”, or use Google.

Circumcellions

From the reading: “The Donatists identified themselves with the African church against the Roman authorities, and there were close links between Donatism and social opposition to the wealthy landowners of north Africa. Groups of men known as ‘Circumcellions’, Donatist devotees with no respect for Roman laws, gave violent expression to this alliance, and caused both the imperial authorities and the Catholic communities much anxiety.”