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AUGUSTINE AND CATHOLIC CHRISTIANIZATION

*The Catholicization of
Roman Africa, 391–408*

HORACE E. SIX-MEANS

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Augustine and Catholic Christianization

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of Roman Africa, 391–408



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SECTION ONE

Thematic Foundations

Introduction

Since at least the latter part of the twentieth century, Christianization has been a topic of great interest in the study of the late Roman Empire, and Augustine of Hippo has featured prominently in a number of these studies. This research mainly focuses on the power struggles of Christians and non-Christians,¹ with limited reference to struggles between Christian groups. The evidence, at least in the case of Roman Africa of the fourth and fifth centuries, however, points to a more complex picture. I will argue in this book that Augustine wanted Africa to be Christian rather than part of what he called “paganism,”² but more significantly, he wanted people to adopt Catholic Christianity as opposed to Donatist, Manichean, Arian,

1. Ramsay MacMullen’s *Christianizing the Roman Empire A.D. 100–400* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), and *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997) are good examples of this tendency.

2. This term “pagan” is used by Augustine and other Christian writers of the period to refer to all those who do not fit into the Christian or Jewish category. This term also has often been used by scholars across the centuries, but recently some scholars have opted to use “polytheism” as a more descriptive and less polemically based term. Compare MacMullen’s works, mentioned above, with Garth Fowden’s article “Polytheist Religion and Philosophy,” in *Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. XIII: *The Late Empire, A.D.*, 3rd ed., edited by Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 538–560. Despite the use of the term “pagan,” however, MacMullen does avoid the pitfall of giving it monolithic meaning.

or any other form of Christianity. The process whereby he works for this end I call Catholicization.³ While this entails the preaching and writing of Augustine at its forefront, it also involves the concerted activity of his fellow bishops as well.

Specifically, with respect to Augustine, I argue that at the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth centuries, Augustine emerged as the African Catholic Church's key articulator and "spin doctor" in a comprehensive, multivalent campaign to Catholicize Roman Africa through a twofold plan. On the one hand, there were strategies for internal reform of the African Catholic Church; on the other hand, there were strategies for combating religious rivals.

In this book, I will be examining the strategies of appeal that Augustine developed for various audiences, from his ordination as a priest in 391 until the fall of Stilicho in 408. I shall focus on sermons given between August 403 and June 404. Particularly of interest are a few sermons from the recently discovered Dolbeau collection.⁴ However, as needed, I shall refer to other sermons, letters, and treatises,

3. "Catholicization" is a term that has been used by scholars before. I was directed by Kathleen McVey to a couple of interesting examples that deal with the period between Jesus and Augustine. They are Gillis Pison Wetter, "La catholicisation du Christianisme primitif," *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* (1927): 17–33; and Damien Casey, "Irenaeus: Touchstone of Catholicity," *Australian eJournal of Theology* 1 (2003), http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aet_1/Casey.htm, accessed May 8, 2004. Wetter argues that the Catholic Church neither fell from heaven nor departed from the teaching of the apostles. His concern is to reject the claims that some make that the Hellenism equated with the development of the Catholic Church as an institution tainted the original purity of the Church. Casey argues that "[t]he Irenaean catholicisation of the sacred is at odds with the sacrificial logic of closure and exclusion." Casey's overarching project is to understand Irenaeus's catholicity on its own terms without distorting his thought to support post-second-century constructions of "Roman" Catholicism. To do that he situates Irenaeus's theology of the Eucharist in his second-century struggles with the Gnostics and argues for an openness in the sacrament against their particularity. These authors, and others, do generally use the term to refer to the process of making Catholic but without reference to the program that I argue was developed by Augustine and his colleagues in Roman Africa.

4. François Dolbeau discovered twenty-six "new" sermons of Augustine in 1990. For his Latin editions with an introduction and notes in French, see François Dolbeau, *Augustin D'Hippone Vingt-Six Sermons au Peuple D'Afrique: Retrouvés à Mayence*, édités et commentés par François Dolbeau, Collection des Études Augustiniennes, Séries Antiquité 147 (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1996). This is a compilation of the various articles wherein Dolbeau previously published editions of the Latin text of the sermons with commentary in French. These articles can be found in *Revue Bénédictine* 101–104 and in *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 37–40. English translations of the sermons can be found in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century: Part III, Sermons*, Vol. 11: *New Sermons*, translated and notes by Edmund Hill, O.P.; and edited by John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1998). These sermons will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

placing them all in relationship to the African Catholic Bishops' Councils⁵ and imperial legislation,⁶ especially the Edict of Unity of 405.⁷

There are four areas of contribution that I see this study making. To begin with, this study refocuses research both on Christianization in Roman Africa and on Augustine's doctrine of the Church. Aside from works on Christianization, there has been much written on Augustine's doctrine of the Church.⁸ However, none of these works deal with the sociohistorical development of Augustine's thinking about the Church in relationship to both pagans and those whom he comes to label as schismatics or heretics. This study will consider the process of Christianization's local manifestation in Roman Africa of the late fourth and early fifth centuries through the thought and action of Augustine. It posits Catholicization as a better term to describe the process uncovered there, whereby Augustine and colleagues sought to establish the legalized dominance of the Catholic Church and win adherence to the Catholic Christian faith from the population across the broad range of socioeconomic strata.

Second, it seeks to study this process primarily from Augustine's perspective. It will describe the development of what he thought and did as the chief theorist and articulator of, and agitator for, this particular ecclesiology.

Third, although Augustine is the pivotal person in the process of Catholicization, it will be shown that he did not act alone. Augustine was at the forefront of a phalanx of bishops, priests, and monks, some of whom he recruited, who sought to establish the true faith against paganism, heresy, and schism.⁹ Most notable

5. See *Concilia Africae A. 345–525*, vol. 149 of *Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina*, edited by Charles Munier (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1974).

6. See *The Theodosian Code [Codex Theodosianus; CT] and Novels and the Sirmondian Constitutions*, translated, with commentary, glossary, and bibliography, by Clyde Pharr in collaboration with Theresa Sherrer Davidson and Mary Brown Pharr, introduction by C. Dickerman Williams (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952).

7. CT 16.5.38.

8. Important starting points on Augustine's ecclesiology have been Agostino Trapé's discussion of Augustine's doctrine of the Church and the bibliography that he gives: *Patrology*, vol. 4, edited by Angelo Di Berardino, introduction by Johannes Quasten, translated by Placid Solari (Westminster MD: Christian Classics, Inc., 1994), 445–449. Some works of particular interest are Pierre Battifol, *Le catholicisme de st. Augustin*, 4th ed. (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre, 1928); P. Bogomeo, *L'Église de ces temps dans la prédication de Saint Augustin* (Paris, 1962); Robert Evans, *One and Holy: The Church in Latin Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1972); Stanislaus Grabowski, *The Church: An Introduction to the Theology of St. Augustine* (St. Louis: Herder, 1957).

9. This is brought out to some degree in the aforementioned works that either have the ecclesiological focus or the Christianization focus. But there is not a work that deals with the subject of the relationship to the issues on which I am concentrating here, nor do they have the benefit of the evidence provided by the new sermons. Jane Merdinger's book, *Rome and the African Church*

among this group is Aurelius, Bishop of Carthage, the first city of Roman Africa, and the contested See, which gave rise to the division of the African Church into Catholic and Donatist parties.

Lastly, this study will be examining material little studied in English. Most important, canons of the African Catholic Bishops' Councils, Augustine's treatise *Contra Cresconium*, and recently discovered sermons will be analyzed. They provide key pieces of evidence from Augustine's early episcopate that, when placed alongside existing evidence, will lead to adjustments in our understanding of Augustine and his context. It is as if we are seeking to restore a mosaic that has been damaged by the passage of time and travelers. Many scenes are quite familiar to us, but these new tesserae cause us to look with a more careful eye at a familiar picture to reconsider what we thought we had already seen.

The book is written in two sections. The first section presents the theoretical framework of our understanding Augustine's role in the process of Catholicization. Then, using the frames developed in Section I, in Section II we look at some key works that support my thesis.

In Section I, Chapters 2, 3, and 4, titled "Self-Understanding," "Social Order," and "Rhetoric," respectively, I explore Augustine's self-understanding, or the role he thinks he is performing. Then, I consider the objective in mind, or what he hopes to produce in his hearers and those for and to whom he writes. Finally, I illustrate the varied rhetorical strategies that he used.

These themes emerged from my reading of Augustine's texts, in particular the sermons. I found Augustine understanding himself as a bishop and shepherd of souls. The chief responsibilities of the bishop are preaching and dispensing the sacraments; it is through these activities that he, as God's servant and imitator of Christ, guides people on the path to salvation. Consistent with what we find in *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine avoids speaking or preaching for mere delight; rather, delight is subordinate to teaching and moving his hearers to action in accord with what they have learned.¹⁰

To articulate my understanding of these themes, and to turn these themes into analytical tools, I have needed to engage a number of different methodological disciplines. I have striven to achieve eclectic simplicity without superficiality. Specialists in the various disciplines I engage may think otherwise.

in *the Time of Augustine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), based on her dissertation, is a good example of how Augustine can be viewed as a leader amongst a cadre of bishops. However, Merdinger focuses on cases of appeal to explain the development of the African Church in relationship to Roman primacy, whereas I will explore the Catholic Church's rise in Africa and Augustine's role in it as my central purpose rather than as an incidental item.

10. *On Christian Doctrine* (*De Doctrina Christina*) 4.12.

Chapter 2 traces the development of Augustine's self-understanding as he moved through various social roles from rhetor to bishop. This is viewed principally from the vantage point of the *Confessions*, with references to other works as well. It is shown that by the time he wrote the *Confessions*, Augustine had linked identity and self-understanding in a way that provided motivation for action. Augustine had become a bishop by 396; this identity obliged him to fulfill certain responsibilities in society. These obligations were akin to those he had as a rhetor, but with a different fundamental motivation and a different authority to whom he was accountable. As a bishop, Augustine would strive to be the humble and faithful servant of God and God's people, and not the prideful servant of his own passions.

Augustine's self-understanding as a bishop committed him to a broad vision of social order, discussed in Chapter 3. The identity of the rhetor fit in a version of social order that was of the temporal age or temporal world. The identity of the bishop fit with an eternal perspective in Augustine's mind. That eternal perspective was the reconciliation of souls to God. Following Cyprian, to a certain degree, Augustine would claim that if one would have God as Father, then the Catholic Church must be mother. Chapter 3 first discusses the development of the recognition and favoring of the Catholic Church in imperial legislation in the late fourth century. It then moves to tracking the development of Augustine's understanding of Catholicity¹¹ while also tracking the development of a plan to make the Catholic Church in Africa the dominant religious institution. The earliest expression we have of this plan is found in Augustine's *Epistle 22*, which is discussed in Chapter 3 as "the charter of Catholicization." In that letter we see Augustine encouraging his friend Aurelius, the bishop of Carthage, to lead the way in pursuing moral reform in the Catholic churches of Africa so that they can better guide people in imitation of Christ and actively confront a range of external opponents.

The last chapter in the first section, Chapter 4, tackles the chief means by which Augustine was personally active in promoting Catholicization, his rhetoric. In this chapter, Augustine's rhetorical strategies are examined both from the perspective of the classical traditions of rhetoric in which he was trained and from the perspective of modern rhetorical analysis drawn principally from literary and political theory. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* is a key source that is examined in this chapter. It provides explicit testimony from Augustine about how he approached persuasive discourse. I argue that *De Doctrina Christiana* also shows

11. I pay particular attention to Augustine's use of Ambrose, Optatus of Milevis, Tyconius, and Cyprian. Augustine returned to Africa having been primarily influenced by Ambrose. But over the first decade of his episcopate, Optatus, Tyconius, and Cyprian became sources on whom Augustine increasingly relied.

how Augustine hoped to train Catholic clergy through this handbook to be more skilled in persuasion as part of his plan of Catholicization.

Section II, “The Road to Unity and Its Aftermath,” revolves around the Edict of Unity and accompanying legislation issued from Ravenna by Emperor Honorius. Chapter 5, “Catholicization and the Preaching Tours of Augustine: August 403–June 404,” focuses on some of Augustine’s preaching between the African Catholic Bishops’ Councils of August 403 and June 404. Augustine’s preaching displays a hardening of the Catholic position that results in the June 404 council sending representatives to Ravenna to ask for a more supportive posture from the government for the Catholic Church. Two groups of sermons are discussed as examples of Augustine’s deployment of rhetorical strategies targeted to audiences outside Hippo, and mainly in Carthage, for the purpose of winning people to the Catholic faith and delegitimizing the positions of opponents.

The last substantive chapter of the book, Chapter 6, deals with Honorius’s Edict of Unity of February 405 and its aftermath through the lenses of Augustine’s work *Contra Cresconium* and his *Epistle* 93 to Vincentius. Augustine’s work against Cresconius is particularly interesting because the attacks that Cresconius levels against Augustine can be seen as one of three challenges: to Augustine’s self-understanding, to the execution of his program of social order (Catholicization), or to the means by which Augustine is personally engaged and implicated in Catholicization through his rhetoric. And, finally, I summarize my conclusions in Chapter 7.

Self-Understanding: From Rhetor to Bishop

Self-Understanding and Self-Presentation

Is it possible to know what Augustine's understanding of himself was, or do we merely encounter his presentation of himself? What is the difference between the two, and, for the purposes of this study, if there is a difference, how much does it matter? All authors, all people, present themselves in ways that possibly do not correspond to the person they perceive themselves to be. The reasons for the distance between the two selves, the self-known self and the presented self, can be placed on a spectrum falling between intentional deceit and innocent limits of intended communication. Also complicating this picture is the degree to which the self-knowledge of a person can be flawed. It is possible for someone to be deceived about themselves.

What, then, are we to make of Augustine? In arguing for the reality of the program of social order that I am calling Catholicization, I claim that Augustine's understanding of himself was crucial in the development of that program. During the years we are considering Augustine's activities, Augustine consistently presents himself as acutely concerned with knowledge and understanding of himself. As early as the *Soliloquies* (*Soliloquia*), begun at Cassiacum in 386¹ but perhaps finished in the

1. On dating and for a good brief introduction and overview, see Allan Fitzgerald, ed., *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), s.v.

winter of 387 after returning to Milan, we see Augustine taking up investigation of the self. *Soliloquium* (*Soliloquia*), “talking to one’s self”² in fact, is a term invented by Augustine to describe his novel project of holding a dialogue between Augustine and Reason (*Ratio*). There in the opening lines he says:

For a long time I had been turning over in my mind many various thoughts. For many days I had been earnestly seeking to know myself and my chief good and what evil was to be shunned. Suddenly someone spoke to me, whether it was myself or someone else from without or from within I know not. Indeed, to know that is my main endeavor.³

Reason instructs Augustine to present the goals of his search to God in the form of a prayer, saying: “Pray for health and for aid to attain what you desire; and write this down that you may become more spirited in your quest.” Then Reason asks him to summarize his prayer and Augustine replies: “I desire to know God and the soul” (*Deum et animam scire cupio*).⁴ Thus, the *Soliloquies* clearly establishes Augustine’s interest in self-understanding. Pursuit of this interest is part of his overall pursuit of truth and wisdom.

If we doubt Augustine’s commitment to truth telling, we do it in the face of his general orientation and his particular commitment as demonstrated throughout his works and presented explicitly in his work *On Lying* (*De Mendacio*) of 395. Augustine there defines the person who lies as follows: “Wherefore, that man lies, who has one thing in his mind and utters another in words, or by signs of whatever kind.”⁵ He proceeds to argue that even though there are kinds of lies of varying degrees, no circumstance justifies an intentional effort to deceive, even for such noble reasons as to spare someone pain or even death.⁶ This pursuit of an honest vision of himself Augustine constantly presents before other people and before God. In the

“*Soliloquia*,” by Joanne McWilliam. See also the introduction to the *Soliloquies*, edited by John H. S. Burleigh, *Soliloquies*, in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 19–22.

2. Lewis and Short’s *A Latin Dictionary*, 1984 ed., “*Soliloquium*.”

3. Augustine, *Soliloquies* 1.1. “Volventi mihi multa ac varia mecum diu, ac per multos dies sedulo quaerenti memetipsum ac bonum meum, quidve mali evitandum esset; ait mihi subito, sive ego ipse, sive alius quis extrinsecus, sive intrinsecus, nescio: nam hoc ipsum est quod magnopere scire molior.”

4. Ibid., 1.2.7.

5. Augustine, *De Mendacio* 3.3. “Quapropter ille mentitur, qui aliud habet in animo, et aliud verbis vel quibuslibet significationibus enuntiat.” For discussion of this work compared to his later work *Contra Mendacium* (420), see *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, 1999 ed., s.v. “*Mendacio, De/ Contra Mendacium*,” by Boniface Ramsey.

6. Augustine, *De Mendacio* 18.25ff.

Confessions, about a decade after the *Soliloquies*, Augustine addresses the questions that readers may have about the reliability of the self-understanding that he presents, as it goes right to the heart of whether he is making an honest confession or not.

Why then should I be concerned for human readers to hear my confessions? It is not they who are going “heal my sicknesses” (Ps. 102:3). The human race is inquisitive about other people’s lives, but negligent to correct their own. Why do they demand to hear from me what I am when they refuse to hear from you what they are? And when they hear me talking about myself how can they know if I am telling the truth, when no one “knows what is going on in a person except the human spirit which is within” (1 Cor. 2:11)? But if they were to hear about themselves from you, they could not say “The Lord is lying.” To hear you speaking about oneself is to know oneself. Moreover, anyone who knows himself and says “That is false” must be a liar. But “love believes all things” (1 Cor. 13:7), at least among those that love has bonded to itself and made one. I also, Lord, so make my confession to you that I may be heard by people to whom I cannot prove that my confession is true. But those whose ears are opened by love believe me.⁷

There are three observations that I want to make about Augustine’s comments here in particular and his approach to self-understanding in general.

1. He wants to be humble and honest⁸ before God.
2. He believes self-knowledge is only received from God.
3. Love is the basis for the reception of knowledge either immediately from God, or mediated through other people.

It may be too much to ask that we love him, yet his interest in the self and in communicating about himself is compelling and should at least warrant our respect. For many scholars it has done as much. With particular reference to the *Confessions*,

7. Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford, 1991), 10.3.3. “Quid mihi ergo est cum hominibus, ut audiant confessiones meas, quasi ipsi sanaturi sint omnes languores meos? Curiosum genus ad cognoscendam vitam alienam, desidiosum ad corrigendam suam. Quid a me quaerunt audire qui sim, qui nolunt a te audire qui sint? Et unde sciunt, cum a me ipso de me ipso audiunt, an verum dicam, quandoquidem nemo scit hominum, quid agatur in homine, nisi spiritus hominis, qui in ipso est? Si autem a te audiant de se ipsis, non poterunt dicere: ‘Mentitur Dominus.’ Quid est enim a te audire de se nisi cognoscere se? Quis porro cognoscit et dicit: ‘Falsum est,’ nisi ipse mentiatur? Sed quia caritas omnia credit, inter eos utique, quos connexos sibimet unum facit, ego quoque, Domine, etiam sic tibi confiteor, ut audiant homines, quibus demonstrare non possum, an vera confitear; sed credunt mihi, quorum mihi aures caritas aperit.”

8. Given his statements in general and his work *De Mendacio* in particular, it is clear that Augustine was passionately seeking truth and he understood the difference between truth telling and falsity.