

RECLAIMING MARTYRDOM:  
AUGUSTINE'S RECONSTRUCTION OF MARTYRDOM  
IN LATE ANTIQUE NORTH AFRICA

A Thesis

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by  
Collin S. Garbarino  
B.A., Louisiana Tech University, 1998  
M.Div., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005  
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Brevis est dies: longo sermone etiam nos tenere  
vestram patientiam  
non debemus (*Serm. 274*).

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## ABSTRACT

The cult of martyrs existed throughout the Mediterranean world in late antiquity, but local communities venerated the martyrs in their own ways and for their own reasons. During the fourth and fifth centuries, two factions of Christianity existed in North Africa. Catholicism and Donatism competed for the souls of North African Christians, and this competition influenced the development of the cult of martyrs in that region. The sermons on the martyrs by Augustine of Hippo (354-430) illuminate the milieu of North African Christianity's cult of martyrs and demonstrate that Augustine viewed "possessing" the martyrs as a key component in overcoming his ecclesiastical rivals. In order to "reclaim" martyrdom from the Donatists, Augustine reinterpreted martyrdom solely in light of the New Testament concept of bearing witness. This reinterpretation had a number of results. First, focusing on witness bearing gave Augustine the justification for invalidating all forms of voluntary martyrdom, which the Donatists tolerated. Secondly, Augustine taught that Christians must not admire the sufferings of martyrs for their own sakes; they must look past the sufferings to honor the cause of the martyrs, which belonged to the Catholics. Third, Augustine's emphasis on the martyrs' cause over the martyrs' sufferings enabled him to expand the classification of martyr well beyond those who had died violently for the faith. This approach to understanding the cult of martyrs demonstrates the unique manner in which one bishop attempted to make the cult relevant to his local circumstances.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In Carthage, Maximian and Isaac became martyrs for their North African church. The account of their sufferings and deaths indicates that the authorities brutally tortured the two before killing them.

Thus a war was waged between his [Maximian's] body and the torturers, between sacrilegious people and a devout man, between strength of soul and butchers, between a soldier of Christ and soldiers of the devil, between an enduring person and his judge. One miserable man was enough to fight so gloriously against so much torture and against such a multitude of the enemy that in this one contest, the enemy could not report a single victory. [...] These very servants of sacrilege hardly had their fill with one victim before handing over another [Isaac] to be sacrificed at their hands in the same way so that they might openly surpass the standards of their ancestors.<sup>1</sup>

After their deaths, the authorities dumped Maximian's and Isaac's bodies in the sea so that their supporters could not honor the martyrs' remains. God provided a miracle, however, causing the martyrs' bodies to wash up on the shore. Rejoicing, their community of faith recovered the bodies and provided them with the proper rites of burial.

This bracing tale of martyrdom contains the hallmarks of its genre: faithful Christians, evil and cruel government officials, torture, death, and God's seal of approval on the actions of his people. The *Passion of Maximian and Isaac*, however, is not as typical as it might first seem. Maximian and Isaac died on August 15, 347,<sup>2</sup> decades after Constantine claimed Christianity as

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<sup>1</sup>*Passio Maximiani et Isaac*, in *Donatist Martyr Stories: the Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa*, Maureen A. Tilley ed. and trans. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), 66-67.

<sup>2</sup>For dating, see Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 61.

his most favored religion. When the text refers to “soldiers of the devil,” it refers to other Christians. In North Africa at the beginning of the fourth century, two rival associations of churches emerged. One gained the support of the Roman emperor; the other suffered his wrath. The two groups shared the same liturgy, but each had its own hierarchy.<sup>3</sup>

When Augustine began his preaching career as bishop of Hippo in 395, he found himself in a rather unenviable position. His communion was the persecutor in the above scenario, but he still needed to preach about martyrdom to his congregation. He had to convince his hearers that the traditions of martyrdom lay with his communion, not his rivals’. Moreover, those Christians in Augustine’s communion had been free of persecution for almost a century, while the Donatist congregations recently had experienced persecution at the hands of those aligned with Augustine.

This study attempts to illuminate Augustine’s North African context by investigating some of his homiletical tactics in this war between rival Christian sects. In his preaching on the martyrs, Augustine breaks with many North African traditions regarding martyrdom, as well as many traditions of the wider Mediterranean. He redefines martyrdom in light of New Testament terminology, widening the gap between the sects and providing his communion with an alternative view of their relationship to the martyrs.

### **The Development of Martyrdom in Early Christianity**

Martyrdom was not static and unchanging. Conceptions and definitions of martyrdom developed and shifted throughout the history of early Christianity. Etymologically, “martyr” comes from the Greek word μάρτυς, which means “testifier” or “witness.” At some point during

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<sup>3</sup>Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: a Biography*, new edition with epilogue (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 207-221.

Christianity's first 150 years, Christians began using this word to describe those who had died violently for the faith. The writers of the New Testament used μάρτυς and its cognates frequently, but in these occurrences the word points to bearing witness or testifying.<sup>4</sup> Sometimes the μάρτυς is an apostle, but often the μάρτυς is God himself.<sup>5</sup> In a couple of New Testament passages the term μάρτυς seems closest to carrying overtones of the sense of "martyr."<sup>6</sup>

In the Revelation to John, a certain Antipas is described as "my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you."<sup>7</sup> Antipas's being a faithful witness is not necessarily contingent on his being killed, but the ideas are closely linked in this passage. John's use of μάρτυς is of interest, however, because he also calls Jesus a faithful witness just before and just after the passage about Antipas.<sup>8</sup> So either Antipas and Jesus are both martyrs or neither are. The second instance of μάρτυς being related to violent death comes when Paul is giving his own testimony to the people of Jerusalem in the twenty-second chapter of Acts. He says, "And when the blood of Stephen thy witness was shed, I also was standing by and approving, and keeping

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<sup>4</sup>Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker [BDAG], 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), v.s. μάρτυς, μαρτυρία, μαρτύριον.

<sup>5</sup>E.g. Rom. 1:9; Phil 1:8; 1 Thess. 2:5, 10; 2 Cor. 1:23.

<sup>6</sup>Bowersock argues that these passages should not be interpreted as having any sense of martyrdom because of the frequency with the Biblical authors used the term to mean merely "witness." G. W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 12-16. Frend, however, uses a more nuanced approach with the New Testament texts. He argues for a development of the term μάρτυς within the canon, and he believes that Johannine literature moves μάρτυς closest to the later meaning of "martyr." W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: a Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), 58-76.

<sup>7</sup>Rev. 2:13. ὁ μάρτυς μου ὁ πιστός μου, ὃς ἀπεκτάνθη παρ' ὑμῖν. All biblical quotations taken from the RSV.

<sup>8</sup>Rev. 1:9; 3:14.

the garments of those who killed him.”<sup>9</sup> Just previous to this statement, however, Paul tells the listening crowd that God told him that he, Paul, would be a μάρτυς. Again, either Luke refers to Paul and Stephen as both being martyrs, or he means that they were both merely witnesses.<sup>10</sup>

The New Testament indicates that Christians experienced various levels of persecution from the Jews early on. Persecution by the Romans, however, did not begin until 64, when Nero blamed Christians for a fire in Rome.<sup>11</sup> Persecution by the Romans waxed and waned throughout the second century. The absence or presence of persecution often depended on political realities that had very little to do with religion. The state’s focus was less on punishing Christians than on the need to force Christians to abandon their beliefs. For the most part, local authorities had the right to suppress or ignore Christian communities as they saw fit.<sup>12</sup> During this second century of sporadic persecutions this word μάρτυς came to have its present definition.

The account of Polycarp’s martyrdom is the earliest unquestionable evidence of μάρτυς being used to mean martyr. Around 150, Polycarp was the elderly bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor.<sup>13</sup> The church in Smyrna was suffering persecution, and Polycarp attempted to avoid it by going into hiding. After his second hiding place was discovered, Polycarp decided that his

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<sup>9</sup>Acts 22:20. καὶ ὅτε ἐξεχύνετο τὸ αἷμα Στεφάνου τοῦ μάρτυρος σου, καὶ αὐτὸς ἤμην ἐφεστῶς καὶ συνευδοκῶν καὶ φυλάσσων τὰ ἱμάτια τῶν ἀναιρούντων αὐτόν.

<sup>10</sup>Of course Luke could possibly have envisioned this link between witness and death since he also wrote that God told Ananias, “I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:16).

<sup>11</sup>Tacitus *Annals* 15.44.

<sup>12</sup>De Ste. Croix provides an interesting analysis of the legality of the persecutions. He argues that in the provinces it was at the provincial authority’s discretion whether and how they would deal with the Christians. G. E. M. De Ste. Croix, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 26-38.

<sup>13</sup>Tradition has it that Polycarp was a disciple of John the Evangelist.

execution must be God's will. The governor told Polycarp that he could go free if only he would curse Christ. Polycarp answered, "For eighty-six years I have been his servant and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme against my king and saviour?"<sup>14</sup> According to the text, Polycarp was both burned and stabbed with a dagger before he died. Polycarp's martyrdom became the archetypical martyr tale for early Christianity.<sup>15</sup> Many later martyr accounts follow the style and structure of this account. Throughout the text, Polycarp and the others who died in Smyrna were referred to as martyrs. Once Christians had fused the idea of witnessing with suffering a violent death for the faith, the concept of martyrdom became a powerful force for building the identity of these Christian communities.<sup>16</sup>

North Africa had an especially strong tradition concerning martyrdom. The cult of the martyrs became very popular in that region, and around the turn of the third century, the North African Tertullian wrote many works exalting martyrdom. Tertullian claimed that God ordained martyrdom. Since God ordained it, it should not be avoided. He also proposed that martyrdom was a second baptism that would remove those sins committed after the first baptism. And he famously wrote that the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the church.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 9.3 in *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, ed. Musurillo, 2-21 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972). Ὀγδοήκοντα καὶ ἕξ ἔτη δουλεύω αὐτῷ καὶ οὐδέν με ἠδίκησεν. κιά πῶς δύναμαι βλασφημῆσαι τὸν βασιλέα μου τὸν σώσαντά με. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

<sup>15</sup>*The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 222-223.

<sup>16</sup>Castelli makes many interesting observations about the power of martyrdom in the early Christian communities' construction of a self-identity. Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>17</sup>Timothy D. Barnes, *Tertullian: a Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 164-186.

Early in the fourth century, the emperor Diocletian instituted a systematic persecution of the Christian communities throughout the empire, which ended when Constantine gained power and began favoring Christianity.<sup>18</sup> Many Christian communities suffered during Diocletian's reign, but in North Africa, the persecution incited rifts between Christians that would never fully heal. Many North African Christians, even bishops, abandoned the faith. North African Christians viewed the unfaithfulness of the bishops as especially egregious because often they surrendered the Scriptures to the Romans. Those who stayed faithful labeled these bishops *traditores*, i.e. "those who had handed over." When the persecution ended, much acrimony existed among the North African congregations. Many of those who had succumbed under persecution wanted to reunite with their congregations, but the return of lapsed bishops posed a special problem. North African Christians argued over whether they should allow these bishops to return to their posts, and whether the sacraments they performed had any value.

The schism of North African Christianity officially began when Caecilian was consecrated as bishop of Carthage in 311.<sup>19</sup> The more rigorous elements in North African Christianity objected to Caecilian's election. They claimed that one of the bishops who consecrated him had been a *traditor*, which made the consecration invalid. They even suggested that Caecilian obstructed aid that was meant for some Christian prisoners awaiting martyrdom during Diocletian's persecution.<sup>20</sup> Quickly Caecilian's opponents elected a rival bishop for

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<sup>18</sup>Barnes claims that Galerius, not Diocletian, was the driving force behind this persecution. Timothy D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 15-27.

<sup>19</sup>Tilley rightly points out that this event was "merely a symptom of a cleavage that began years before." Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: the Donatist World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 10. Caecilian's election, however, does represent a parting of the ways instead of division within a self-identifying group.

<sup>20</sup>*Acta Saturnini* 20 (PL 8:689-703).

Carthage, Majorinus. Neither bishop surrendered his claim, and separate hierarchies emerged. Majorinus's successor, Donatus, lends his name to this rival faction, which came to be called the Donatists.<sup>21</sup>

Both factions appealed to Constantine for support.<sup>22</sup> When Constantine and the bishops he consulted decided that the Christians in communion with Caecilian were the Catholics, the Donatists decided that the new Roman administration was reprobate. Rome confirmed their suspicions when it attempted to unify the churches through force. This new stance towards Christianity was merely the old persecution in a new disguise.

Thus, by the time that Augustine began preaching on the martyrs, he had to deal with North Africa's strong tradition of martyrdom and apply it to Christians who found themselves at peace with the government. Simultaneously, he had to explain why the Donatist congregations had no claim to this same tradition, even though they seemed to embody it. The North African congregations were a battleground in which bishops waged war through their sermons. The spoils of war were the souls of men and women. Every sermon that Augustine delivered on a martyr's feast day either explicitly or implicitly explained why those in attendance ought to be in his communion. Unlike in other cities of the Roman world, people had a choice of which church suited them best.

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<sup>21</sup>In spite of Brent Shaw's extended diatribe on the laziness of historians who refer to the two parties as Donatist and Catholic, I will use the traditional nomenclature. Shaw correctly notes that both factions viewed themselves as "the Catholics," but calling the two factions "North African Christians" and "other North African Christians" seems unnecessarily unwieldy. For Shaw's delightful vituperation, see Brent D. Shaw, "African Christianity: Disputes, Definitions, and 'Donatists,'" in *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Religious Movements: Discipline and Dissent*, eds. Malcolm R. Greenshields and Thomas A. Robinson, 4-34 (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992).

<sup>22</sup>Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 56-61.

## **Historiography on Donatism and Martyrdom**

This study bridges two areas of scholarship on early Christianity that are in flux. Scholars have yet to reach a consensus on either the nature of Donatism or the nature of martyrdom. This study investigates both in order to understand the dynamic relationship between the two in Augustine's preaching and to illuminate the influence that Donatism exerted on Catholic conceptions of martyrdom and the cult of the martyrs. In Augustine's sermons, one sees the Donatist question's power over North Africa's cult of the martyrs.

Much controversy surrounds the history of Donatism. The most influential work on Donatism remains W. H. C. Frend's 1952 study.<sup>23</sup> In this work, Frend claims that Donatism was not merely a theological controversy. Frend believes that Donatism was a cultural and economic movement in which the indigenous North African culture attempted to assert itself against the Latin culture of the urban elites.<sup>24</sup> Frend's work has influenced all writing on the Donatists and Augustine's relationship to them for half a century, and until his death, Frend continued to promote and revise his thesis. Recently, however, some scholars have begun to reevaluate much of Frend's work.

Maureen Tilley's work on Donatism approaches the schism from the perspective of the Donatists. By focusing on the limited number of texts from the Donatists themselves, Tilley

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<sup>23</sup>W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: a Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952.

<sup>24</sup>Frend supposes that the indigenous culture was a proto-Berber. For evidence of the Semitic elements in Augustine's North Africa see William M. Green, "Augustine's Use of Punic," in *Semitic and Oriental Studies: a Volume Presented to William Popper Professor of Semitic Languages, Emeritus on the Occasion of his Seventy-fifth Birthday*, 179-190 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951).

attempts to reconstruct the spirit of Donatism in *The Bible in Christian North Africa*.<sup>25</sup> Tilley believes that Donatist congregations viewed themselves as carrying on the traditions of the *collecta* of Israel. Due to the limited number of sources, some of Tilley's thesis regarding the motivations behind Donatism is mere conjecture; however, she does place a correct emphasis on the fundamentally religious nature of the schism. As Brent Shaw points out, the main combatants in this battle were the bishops, and their battlefield was the realm of popular opinion.<sup>26</sup>

While scholars reevaluate Donatism, the scholarship on martyrdom also continues to develop. The martyr texts indicate that martyrdom comprised various strands of thought. These multiple strands incline historians of martyrdom to locate martyrdom's source in a variety of places. In 1967, Frend also wrote the influential *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*. In this book, he emphasizes the Judaic roots of martyrdom, saying, "Without Maccabees and without Daniel a Christian theology of martyrdom would scarcely have been thinkable."<sup>27</sup> In *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, Frend demonstrates an enviable command of the source material, but he often seems to posit a certain uniformity to the experiences of Christian communities throughout the empire.

In *Martyrdom and Rome*, Glen Bowersock scathingly criticizes Frend and other scholars who "have practiced a kind of crude and antiquated literary criticism to emphasize banal coincidences in various narratives of resistance to authority and heroic self-sacrifice as if every

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<sup>25</sup>Maureen A. Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: the Donatist World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

<sup>26</sup>Shaw, "African Christianity," 4-10.

<sup>27</sup>Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church*, 54.

such episode constituted martyrdom.”<sup>28</sup> Instead of positing Jewish roots for martyrdom, Bowersock believes that the experience of martyrdom would not have been possible apart from Roman culture. Rome provided the context for martyrdom and the ideal of a noble death, which Bowersock believes is its kernel.<sup>29</sup> Bowersock denies any continuity between the Maccabean martyrs and those of the early Christian communities. Bowersock’s criticism, however, overlooks the fact that many Christians around the Mediterranean fully integrated the Maccabean texts into their meta-narrative. This integration complicates Bowersock’s thesis because whatever the source of martyrdom, many early Christians believed that it partly derived from Judaism, which brings up questions of perception versus reality.

In his relatively recent book on martyrdom in late antiquity, Daniel Boyarin critiques the approaches of both Frensdorff and Bowersock. Boyarin’s purpose in his book is to investigate the discourse of martyrdom between Christians and Jews in late antiquity.<sup>30</sup> Boyarin’s model allows for a dynamic Christianity and Judaism, with each of these two related groups using martyrdom to define both itself and the other. Viewing martyrdom as a discourse instead of an event helps in accounting for the multiple meanings that the Christian communities imputed to martyrdom. Boyarin particularly attacks Frensdorff’s analysis because he believes Frensdorff’s view of Judaism is too static.<sup>31</sup> He takes issue with Bowersock as well, claiming, “By posing the issue the way he does,

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<sup>28</sup>Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 26-27.

<sup>29</sup>Bowersock also claims that the use of written records is more evidence of the Roman foundation of martyrdom. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 23-39. Interestingly, Momigliano claims that a use of written records was unique to ecclesiastical historians in the Roman world and was founded in the Jewish historical tradition of Ezra. Arnaldo Momigliano, *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>30</sup>Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

<sup>31</sup>Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 127-130.

Bowersock is reinscribing a phenomenological boundary between Jews and Christians, a sort of pure Christianity, pure Judaism, and indeed pure Greco-Romanness.”<sup>32</sup> Focusing on the “discourse” allows the historian to understand the evolving conception of martyrdom in early Christianity, an evolution with multiple emphases expounded by a multitude of voices, which cannot be neatly traced back to one fount. The discourse become even more varied when to the significance of martyrdom itself, one adds the meanings that later Christians attached to the cult of martyrs.

Martyrdom, however, was not merely a discourse between Jewish and Christian communities. The Catholics and Donatists of North Africa developed their own narratives as they decided how they should relate to the martyrs. This work attempts to investigate Augustine’s side of the discourse, in which he uses the martyrs to delineate between Catholics and Donatists. Since both factions were so similar Augustine creates divisions so that he can justify his call for his congregants to stay within his communion. The Donatists had a firm grasp on the traditions of martyrdom, so Augustine sought to redefine those traditions and reclaim them from the Donatists.

### **Sermons as Sources**

Augustine wrote numerous tracts against the Donatists, but this study focuses on the sermons that he delivered on the martyrs’ feast days. The sermons provide a unique perspective on the North African conflict. Though sermons could be transcribed and spread around, their immediate purpose was to capture the hearts of those listening. The sermons reflect Augustine’s congregation-level tactics in the battle to sway popular opinion. Not only do they project the dynamic interplay between Augustine’s theology of martyrdom and his disdain for the Donatists,

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<sup>32</sup>Boyarin, *Dying for God*, 96.

but they also reflect the concerns of his nameless congregants, as well as their disobedience of the bishop's authority. Behind every homiletic exhortation lies the reluctance of the flock to follow.<sup>33</sup>

The sermons on the martyrs evince one aspect of Augustine's program of re-forming the Catholic self-conception in opposition to the Donatists. The next chapter of this work explores Augustine's attempt to return to a more primitive definition of martyrdom founded on New Testament witness bearing. It compares Augustine's views on martyrdom to the traditions of the Donatist congregations and those of the wider Mediterranean. Chapter three investigates Augustine's condemnation of voluntary martyrdom and how he related it to the Donatist schism. This condemnation flows from his redefining of martyrdom. The fourth chapter examines issues regarding spectacle and suffering in Augustine's views on martyrdom. Though he affirms these aspects, he subsumes them broadly into bearing witness. The final chapter explains how Augustine believed the martyrs related to his flock, and how he was able to reclaim the experience of martyrdom for Christians who were free of persecution.

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<sup>33</sup>Wayne A. Meeks and Robert L. Wilken, *Jews and Christians in Antioch in the First Four Centuries of the Common Era*, Sources for Biblical Study, no 13 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), 31.

## CHAPTER 2

### WITNESS BEARING IN AUGUSTINE'S CONCEPTION OF MARTYRDOM

By the time Augustine began preaching in Hippo, most Christians no longer faced the possibility of persecution. Martyrdom, however, remained an integral part of church life through the celebration of feast days for the martyrs. On these feast days, the congregation would annually honor the memory of a martyr or a group of martyrs who had died on that day. Augustine faced the challenge of applying martyrdom to a persecution-free congregation, while simultaneously opposing the persecuted Donatists who seemed to carry on the traditions of the martyrs. Since the second century, martyrdom had carried connotations of religious sacrifice interwoven with its purpose of bearing witness. This sacrificial tradition was especially strong in North Africa, where the Donatists claimed to be the only true Church because of their faithfulness in sacrificing themselves in order to protect the Scriptures. Augustine, however, preaches to his congregation only the witness bearing aspect of martyrdom, ignoring the sacrificial aspect, in spite of the churches' traditional language that unified witnessing with sacrifice.

#### **Sacrifice and Witness Bearing in the Traditions of Martyrdom**

This language of martyrdom, which mixed sacrifice with witness bearing, had a long history of use in Christian communities. The letters of Ignatius provide the earliest example after the New Testament of a Christian willing to die for his faith. Ignatius was bishop of Antioch in Syria. He was sent to Rome for execution at the turn of the second century, and on his journey

he penned seven letters. These letters provide insight into the history of Christianity at this time and illuminate how Ignatius viewed his coming execution in Rome.<sup>34</sup> Ignatius does not use the word μάρτυς to describe his impending death; rather, he uses language reminiscent of sacrifice. Regardless of whether Ignatius viewed his death as a μαρτύριον, subsequent Christian generations did. Ignatius's use of sacrificial language, therefore, served to strengthen that sacrificial death strand in the churches' conceptions of martyrdom. In his letter to the church in Rome, he tells them not to try to stop his execution by the authorities. Rather, Ignatius desired "to be poured out to God as an offering while there is still a ready altar."<sup>35</sup> In the letter, Ignatius explains his hope that wild beasts might devour him. He asks the Roman church, "Petition the Lord on my behalf, in order that through these tools [the beasts] I might be found to be a sacrifice for God."<sup>36</sup> While Ignatius talked about his death as a sacrifice to God, he also acknowledged its witness bearing aspect. Through his martyrdom, Ignatius expected to become a "word of God."<sup>37</sup> He does not use the word "martyr," but Ignatius's letter to the Romans testifies to the dual purpose that early Christians expected their deaths to serve: witness and sacrifice.

Similarly, the record of Polycarp's martyrdom, which took place a few decades after Ignatius's, reveals this same mixture of sacrifice and witness bearing. The author of Polycarp's martyrdom compares Polycarp to "a splendid ram" (κριὸς ἐπίσημος) and "a whole burnt-

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<sup>34</sup>Presumably, Ignatius did actually arrive in Rome and suffer execution. No evidence exists, however, beyond his seven letters.

<sup>35</sup>Ignatius *Ad Romanos* 2.2 in *The Apostolic Fathers*, 166-175. πλέον δέ μοι μὴ παράσχησθε τοῦ σπονδισθῆναι θεῷ, ὡς ἔτι θυσιαστήριον ἔτοιμόν ἐστιν.

<sup>36</sup>Ignatius *Ad Rom.* 4.2. λιτανεύσατε τὸν Κύριον ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ, ἵνα διὰ τῶν ὀργάνων τούτων θεοῦ θυσία εὐρεθῶ.

<sup>37</sup>Ignatius *Ad Rom.* 2.1. ἐγὼ λόγος θεοῦ

offering” (ὄλοκαύτωμα),<sup>38</sup> but Polycarp’s recorded words do not indicate that he saw his death as containing any aspect of atonement. Instead, he provides the testimonial aspect of martyrdom by engaging in praise to God. Before the lighting of the fires, Polycarp prays, “For this and regarding everything, I praise you, I bless you, I glorify you through the eternal and heavenly high priest Jesus Christ, your beloved child, through whom to you with him and the Holy Spirit be glory now and into the future eternity.”<sup>39</sup>

Ignatius and Polycarp both led churches in the East, but Christians in the western part of the empire suffered early on as well. In 177 during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, persecution broke out against the church in Lyons in the province of Gaul. Popular prejudice facilitated persecution of the Christians, many of whom were immigrants from Asia Minor. These Christians brought the twin ideas of the martyrdom as sacrifice and witness bearing with them. In the *Martyrs of Lyons*, the writer acknowledges the role of witness bearing by relating that the martyrs “completed with all readiness a confession of their testimony.”<sup>40</sup> He also views them as sacrifices, saying, “Attalus was placed on an iron chair and scorched, while the sacrificial odor arose from his body.”<sup>41</sup> Of Blandina, he writes:

After being sufficiently thrown about by the [bull], she no longer understood what was happening because of the hope and retention of the things in which she believed and

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<sup>38</sup>*Mart. Polycarp* 14.1.

<sup>39</sup>*Mart. Polycarp* 14.3. διὰ τοῦτο καὶ περὶ πάντων σὲ αἰνῶ, σὲ εὐλογῶ, σὲ δοξάζω διὰ τοῦ αἰωνίου καὶ ἐπουρανίου ἀρχιερέως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἀγαπητοῦ σου παιδός, δι’ οὗ σοὶ σὺν αὐτῶ καὶ πνεύματι ἁγίῳ δόξα καὶ νῦν καὶ εἰς τοὺς μέλλοντας αἰῶνας. ἀμήν.

<sup>40</sup>*Martyrs of Lyons* 1.11 in *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 62-85. οἱ καὶ μετὰ πάσης προθυμίας ἀνεπλήρουν τὴν ὁμολογίαν τῆς μαρτυρίας.

<sup>41</sup>*Mart. Lyons* 1.52. ὁ δὲ Ἄτταλος, ὅποτε ἐπὶ τῆς σιδηρᾶς ἐπετέθη καθέδρας καὶ περιεκαίετο, ἤνικα ἢ ἀπὸ τοῦ σώματος κνῖσα ἀνεφέρετο.

because of her communion with Christ. So she was sacrificed, while the people agreed that never yet has a woman suffered so much in such a manner.<sup>42</sup>

The Christian community in Lyons recognized harmony between a martyrdom's testimony and its sacrificial nature.

Early in the fourth century, Eusebius wrote the *Martyrs of Palestine*, which chronicles the persecution that Eusebius witnessed under Diocletian. Eusebius continues in the same tradition found in those earlier martyr tales. He recognizes both a strand of sacrifice and a strand of witness bearing as being components of martyrdom. In the *Martyrs of Palestine*, Eusebius calls his martyred friend Apphianus “the blessed and truly innocent lamb,” seemingly an allusion to martyrdom as sacrifice. At the same time, however, he reiterates the martyrs’ purpose as witnesses by claiming that Apphianus achieved his martyrdom by “boldness in confessing God.”<sup>43</sup>

Martyrdom became an intrinsic aspect of the Christian narratives. By the end of the apostolic era, Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire combined notions of sacrifice with witness bearing in order to make sense of their persecution. These two aspects do not seem to be held in tension, but embraced equally. Christianity in the empire, however, were not monolithic. Theological emphases varied from community to community, and the churches of North Africa had an especially strong tradition of martyrdom.

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<sup>42</sup>*Mart. Lyons* 1.56. καὶ ἰκανῶς ἀναβληθεῖσα πρὸς τοῦ ζῶου μηδὲ αἴσθησιν ἔτι τῶν συμβαινόντων ἔχουσα διὰ τὴν ἐλπίδα καὶ ἐποχὴν τῶν πεπιστευμένων καὶ ὁμιλίαν πρὸς Χριστόν, ἐτύθη καὶ αὐτὴ καὶ αὐτῶν ὁμολογούντων τῶν ἔθνῶν ὅτι μηδεπώποτε παρ’ αὐτοῖς γυνὴ τοιαῦτα καὶ τσσαῦτα ἔπαθεν.

<sup>43</sup>Eusebius *Martyrs of Palestine* 4. παρρησίας τῆς εἰς Θεὸν ὁμολογίας, τοῦ μακαρίου καὶ ὡς ἀληθῶς ἀμνοῦ ἀκάκου (trans. NPNF<sup>2</sup>).

## **North African Traditions about Martyrdom and Sacrifice**

Though the traditions of North African Christianity acknowledged martyrdom's witness bearing, the sacrificial nature of martyrdom gained greater prominence. Indeed, the martyr traditions in North Africa even incorporate atoning sacrifice into the martyrs' deaths. As noted above, sacrificial language filled the churches' writings about the martyrs, but this language did not explicitly indicate an atoning sacrifice. If a specific kind of sacrifice was in mind, it may have been one of thanksgiving or praise. An idea of atonement exists, however, in the writings of Tertullian on martyrdom and in some of the martyr texts. The Donatist congregations in North Africa seemed to carry on in this same tradition.

Writing in the early third century, Tertullian provides insight into the values of the Christian society in which he found himself.<sup>44</sup> Though primarily an apologist for the Christian faith, Tertullian was also an advocate and defender of martyrdom. He believed that martyrdom's witness bearing aspect would draw others to Christianity. He also believed that Christian faith would engender a desire for martyrdom in the believer and that a death of this kind would atone for the martyr's sins.

For who that contemplates it [martyrdom], is not excited to inquire what is at the bottom of it? who, after inquiry, does not embrace our doctrines? and when he has embraced them, desires not to suffer that he may become partaker of the fullness of God's grace, that he may obtain from God complete forgiveness, by giving in exchange his blood? For that secures the remission of all offences.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup>Barnes, *Tertullian*, 2.

<sup>45</sup>Tertullian *Apologeticum* 50.15-16. Quis enim non contemplatione eius concutitur ad requirendum, quid intus in re sit? Quis non, ubi requisivit, accedit, ubi accessit, pati exoptat, ut totam Dei gratiam redimat, ut omnem veniam ab eo compensatione sanguinis sui expediat? Omnia enim huic operi delicta donantur (trans. ANF).

According to Tertullian, the martyrs' deaths ensured the forgiveness of their sins and their places in heaven. He even compared martyrdom to a second baptism in blood that could wash away any sins committed after the Christian's water baptism.<sup>46</sup>

North African martyr texts use similar language. The notion of martyrdom as a second baptism is found in the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* who were martyred in Carthage c. 200.<sup>47</sup> In the *Passion*, both Felicitas and Saturnus are said to have received a second baptism because of their contest with the beasts.<sup>48</sup> In the *Martyrdom of Saints Marian and James*, which dates to the end of the third century, the author indicates that the martyrs themselves make atonement for sins by paying back with their blood.<sup>49</sup> The martyrs in the North African tradition shed their own blood to finish the work that Christ's blood had started.

Some scholars suppose that the idea of sacrifice merged with martyrdom in the region because of North Africa's traditional cult of Saturn. The Saturn cult originally used human sacrifice in its rituals, and these scholars believe that this indigenous religious expression resurfaced in North African Christianity.<sup>50</sup> This cult, however, predated the Donatist movement by many centuries. North African Christianity's more pronounced ideas about martyrdom and sacrifice need not be explained with reference to the Saturn cult's human sacrifice. Both Christianity and its Jewish roots proposed the necessity of blood atonement. The texts of the

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<sup>46</sup>Tert. *De Baptismo* 16.2.

<sup>47</sup>Perpetua and Felicitas were contemporaries of Tertullian, and some scholars speculate that he had a hand in producing the text of their passion. For a discussion of Tertullian's possible relationship to the passion, see Barnes, *Tertullian*, 71-80.

<sup>48</sup>*Passio Perpetuae et Felicitatis* 18.3; 21.2, in *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 106-131.

<sup>49</sup>*Passio Mariani et Iacobi* 13.5, in *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 194-213.

<sup>50</sup>Frend, *Martyrdom*, 267; Serge Lancel, *Saint Augustine*, trans. Antonia Nevill (London: SCM Press, 2002), 163.

New Testament indicated that Jesus was that atoning sacrifice. Naturally, some Christians would feel the need to imitate Christ even to an extreme level and suppose that their violent deaths were also some sort of atonement for their sins. The divine Christ died for the sins of many, but North African Christians could at least die for those sins they committed after their baptism.

Donatist texts reflect these same North African traditions that the so-called orthodox texts do. Though only a handful of Donatist martyr tales survive, these texts indicate that the Donatist churches embraced the sacrificial aspect of their martyrs' deaths. Felix, the bishop of Thibiuca, was burned in 303. Though he died before the schism, scholars believe that the *Passion of Saint Felix* reflects the values of the North African Donatists because of its emphasis on protecting the Scriptures at the cost of one's life.<sup>51</sup> This text portrays Felix in a sacrificial light. Before his martyrdom Felix prays to Jesus, "To you I bend my neck as a sacrificial victim."<sup>52</sup> The idea of the priest as sacrifice is reiterated in the *Passion of Marculus*. The Donatist community viewed the priest Marculus, who was executed under the authority of a Christian emperor in 347, in the same manner. Marculus is said to have offered "a twin sacrifice" because he performed the Eucharist on the day of his martyrdom: "So the pure one [Marculus] approached to place the sacrifice on the altar of Christ, that he himself would merit to become a sacrifice for Christ."<sup>53</sup>

While most Christian communities in the Roman Empire enjoyed a time of peace after Constantine became sole emperor, the Donatists continued to experience varying levels of

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<sup>51</sup>Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 8.

<sup>52</sup>*Acta Felicis* 6 (PL 8:688). Domine Deus caeli et terrae, Iesu Christe, tibi cervicem meam ad victimam flecto. Felix's martyrology has widely variant readings, but this statement is in both *Acta Felicis* and *Passio Felicis*.

<sup>53</sup>*Passio Marculi*. ad offerendum geminum sacrificium (PL 8:762d). Ad imponendas Christi altaribus hostias tam purus accederet, ut fieri pro Christo hostia ipse mereretur (PL 8:763a).

persecution. This persecution at the hands of the Roman officials allowed the Donatists to maintain a continuity of tradition with the pre-Constantinian churches regarding martyrdom. In his struggle against the Donatists, Augustine attempted to redefine the Christian tradition of martyrdom for his congregation in order to distinguish them from the Donatists and in order to take back the concept of martyrdom which the Donatists seemed to own.

### **Augustine Emphasizes the Testimony of Martyrdom**

Perhaps in reaction to his context, Augustine communicates to his congregation a new tradition of martyrdom, free of the notion of martyrs as sacrifices. Augustine bases his conclusions about martyrdom in the New Testament, in which *μάρτυς* primarily means “witness.” Thus, Augustine reconceives the Christian experience of martyrdom solely in light of New Testament witness bearing. Even though the connotations of sacrifice were strong in Christian martyrdom, Augustine tends to avoid sacrificial language when talking about martyrdom to his congregation. He had theological justification for truncating the martyrdom tradition. The apostle Paul taught that Christ’s passion had made full atonement for the sins of his people.<sup>54</sup> Christian suffering was not another sacrifice, but it was a sign of the eschaton.<sup>55</sup> Augustine, therefore, tries to persuade his listeners that witness bearing constitutes the whole of martyrdom. This was no mean feat since on a martyr’s feast day the martyr texts, laden with sacrificial language, were read directly before Augustine delivered his sermon. Augustine used all his skill as a preacher and rhetorician to direct his listeners’ attention to the strand of the tale he thought most profitable for their lives as Christians. In his sermons he describes what and

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<sup>54</sup>Rom 3:23-25.

<sup>55</sup>Col 1:24; cf. Mark 13:20.

how the martyrs confessed, and he even recasts the martyr texts most clearly leaning towards atoning sacrifice as primarily martyrdoms of confession.

Augustine teaches his people that martyrdom does not perform any redemptive work for the martyr, as the North African tradition of martyrdom being a second baptism indicated. Instead, Augustine maintains that clear distinction between the blood of Christ and the blood of the martyrs. In 425, Augustine preached a sermon to dedicate the relics of Stephen that had recently been brought to Hippo.<sup>56</sup> In this sermon, Augustine tells those North Africans who had gathered for the dedication, “Those who poured out their blood for their redeemer, they were redeemed by his blood. He poured out his in order to buy their salvation; they poured out theirs in order to spread his gospel.”<sup>57</sup> Only the blood of Christ redeems the Christian; the Christian’s blood provides the testimony by which the Church grows.

Augustine taught his people that the martyrs were martyrs because they bore witness, not because they offered themselves in sacrifice. One year, on the feast day of the Scillitan martyrs, a group of North Africa’s earliest martyrs, Augustine opened his sermon as he typically did by defining martyrdom. He said, “The day of this feast exhorts concerning the martyrs of Christ, that is the witnesses of Christ who were not embarrassed to confess his name before men.”<sup>58</sup> In this same sermon, Augustine continues to define martyrdom and detail its importance.

‘Martyrs,’ the word is Greek, are called ‘witnesses’ [*testes*] in Latin. Therefore the holy martyrs, not false witnesses but true ones, brought forward a witness with their blood that

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<sup>56</sup>I will investigate Augustine’s relationship to Stephen’s relics in more detail in chapter five. Until then, it will suffice to say that Augustine maintains these important distinctions even after developing an excitement for the martyr’s cult.

<sup>57</sup>Augustine *Sermones* 318.1 (PL 38:1438). Redempti sunt sanguine, qui sanguinem pro Redemptore fuderunt. Ille fudit, ut eorum salus redimeretur: illi fuderunt, ut Evangelium eius diffamaretur.

<sup>58</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 299F.1 (PLS 2:788). De martyribus Christi, hoc est de testibus Christi, qui non sunt confusi confiteri nomen eius coram hominibus, dies huius sollemnitatis hortatur.

there is another life preferable to this life, because they bravely scorned the passing one. You heard the confessions of the martyrs whose feast is celebrated today, when they were recited.”<sup>59</sup>

This definition of martyrdom, characteristic of Augustine, contains no hint of sacrificial language. The martyrs died, but that death was a witness in blood to “another life preferable to this life.” Again and again, Augustine emphasizes this confessional aspect of martyrdom to his congregation.

Augustine believed that God himself provided this message in the martyrdom; this was no mere testimony of the martyrs themselves. This being the case, Augustine naturally gives a testimony of God preeminence over any supposed sacrifice of a martyr. Augustine claims that the Spirit of God inspired the verbal witness of the martyrs. On Vincent’s feast day in 412, Augustine preached:

For in the gospel Christ promised this too to his witnesses, when he was preparing them for this kind of contest. For thus he said: ‘Do not consider beforehand how or what you should say. For you are not the one who speaks, but the Spirit of your Father is the one who speaks in you.’ Therefore the flesh was suffering, and the Spirit was speaking.<sup>60</sup>

Augustine teaches this view that the Spirit spoke through the martyrs because if the martyrs spoke under their own power, then their testimony would be flawed since all humans are flawed.

According to Augustine, the Spirit not only provided this verbal testimony but also the dramatic witness in deed that testified to the Christian’s eternal life. In Augustine’s thinking, martyrdom is almost a sort of divine didactic drama in which the martyrs’ deaths remind people

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<sup>59</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 299F.1 (PLS 2:789). *Martyres, graecum nomen est, latine testes dicuntur. Martyres ergo sancti, testes non falsi sed veri, esse aliam vitam huic vitae praeponendam sanguine suo testimonium perhibuerunt, quia istam transeuntem fortiter contempserunt. Confessiones martyrum quorum hodie sollemnitas celebratur, cum recitarentur, audistis.*

<sup>60</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 276.2 (PL 38:1256). *Promisit enim et hoc testibus suis Christus in Evangelio, quos ad huiusmodi certamina praeparabat. Sic enim ait: Nolite praemeditari quomodo aut quid loquamini. Non enim vos estis qui loquimini, sed Spiritus Patris vestri qui loquitur in vobis. Caro ergo patiebatur, et Spiritus loquebatur.*

that earthly life is secondary to a future, eternal life. Augustine says, “And so by believing they seized life, and by speaking they found death, but a death in which the body is sown perishable and reaped imperishable.”<sup>61</sup> Just as in any morality play, the message is more important than the drama itself.

In a sermon delivered in Carthage on the North African martyrs Marian and James, Augustine explains that God inspired the patience to bear a martyr’s death, just as he inspired the words the martyrs spoke. He explains, “Patience descends from the unchangeable fount into changeable human minds, to make them unchangeable also. From where can humans gain the ability to please God, except from God?”<sup>62</sup> Augustine gives the witnessing aspect of martyrdom preeminence over the sacrificial aspect because it is the part of martyrdom that God does. The divine message, whether explicit in word or implied in deed, is perfect, and Augustine gives it primacy by ignoring the human contribution to the equation.

As in the case of Marian and James, the martyr texts often allude to the sacrificial nature of the martyrs’ deaths. In his sermons, however, Augustine conspicuously ignores this point. His sermons on the Maccabean martyrs make an interesting case study. Augustine’s treatment of these texts is both typical and extreme—typical because he employs the avoidance tactic that he uses in many of his martyr sermons, extreme because the language in the Maccabean text is so laden with sacrificial language.

The Maccabean martyrs died during persecution of the Jews by the Seleucid Antiochus IV from 167 to 164 BC. The Jewish communities responsible for the composition and

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<sup>61</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 306D.1 (PLS 2:785). *Credendo itaque adprehenderunt vitam et loquendo invenerunt mortem, sed mortem in qua corpus corruptibile seminaretur et incorruptio meteretur.*

<sup>62</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 284.1 (PL 38:1288). *Ad humanas mentes mutabiles de fonte immutabili descendit patientia, quae et ipsas faciat immutabiles. Unde homini placere Deo, nisi a Deo?*

transmission of the Maccabean texts viewed the deaths of these martyrs as sacrifices of atonement. In 2 Maccabees, Antiochus attempts to force seven brothers to eat pork, and they all embrace death rather than violate their Law. These martyrs located the cause of their misery in God's wrath. God had abandoned his people because they had abandoned his Law. The seventh brother tells Antiochus, "I, like my brothers, give up body and life for the laws of our fathers, appealing to God to show mercy soon to our nation [...] and through me and my brothers to bring to an end the wrath of the Almighty which has justly fallen on our whole nation."<sup>63</sup> The author of 4 Maccabees even more explicitly emphasizes the atoning nature of a Jewish martyr's death. In 4 Maccabees, Eleazar says, "Make my blood their purification, and take my life in exchange for theirs."<sup>64</sup> Summing up the entire persecution, the narrator claims, "And through the blood of those devout ones and their death as an expiation, divine Providence preserved Israel that previously had been afflicted."<sup>65</sup>

In order to avoid this sacrificial laden language, Augustine could have avoided the Maccabean martyrs entirely, claiming that Jewish martyrs were not properly Christian. A recognized feast day, however, celebrated these martyrs, and Augustine was not in the habit of overtly breaking tradition. Instead he redefined tradition to suit his purposes. In order to answer any objection to their feast day being celebrated, Augustine plainly states, "They were Christians; but they anticipated with their deeds the name of Christians, which was made

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<sup>63</sup>2 Maccabees 7:37-38. ἐγὼ δέ, καθάπερ οἱ ἀδελφοί, καὶ σῶμα καὶ ψυχὴν προδίδωμι περὶ τῶν πατρίων νόμων ἐπικαλούμενος τὸν θεὸν ἵλεως ταχὺ τῷ ἔθνει γενέσθαι καὶ [...] ἐν ἐμοὶ δὲ καὶ τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς μου στήσαι τὴν τοῦ παντοκράτορος ὄργην τὴν ἐπὶ τὸ σὺμπαν ἡμῶν γένος δικαίως ἐπηγγέμενην.

<sup>64</sup>4 Maccabees 6:29. καθάρσιον αὐτῶν ποιήσον τὸ ἐμὸν αἷμα καὶ ἀντίψυχον αὐτῶν λαβὲ τὴν ἐμὴν ψυχὴν.

<sup>65</sup>4 Maccabees 17:22. καὶ διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τῶν εὐσεβῶν ἐκείνων καὶ τοῦ ἰλαστηρίου τοῦ θανάτου αὐτῶν ἡ θεία πρόνοια τὸν Ἰσραὴλ προκακωθέντα διέσωσεν.

common afterwards.”<sup>66</sup> As in his sermons on other martyrs, Augustine ignores the sacrificial language in the text that describes their martyrdoms. Instead, he emphasizes the witness bearing aspect of their martyrdoms. According to Augustine, even though these Jewish martyrs could not explicitly witness to Christ, since he had not been born yet, they implicitly witnessed to him. By witnessing to the Law of Moses, the Maccabean martyrs witnessed to Christ. Augustine believed that the Old Testament spoke the same truth as the New Testament, but behind a veil.<sup>67</sup> Augustine, therefore, accords the Maccabean martyrs the same honor as their Christian counterparts: “The [Christian] martyrs confessed plainly the same one whom the Maccabees at that time confessed secretly. The former died for Christ unveiled in the gospel; the latter died for the name of Christ veiled in the Law. Christ held both, Christ aided both as they struggled, Christ crowned both.”<sup>68</sup> Augustine teaches his parishioners that these proto-Christian martyrs bore the same defining features as their later brethren. They bore witness for Christ in their words and action, and on this witness bearing their status as martyrs hinged.

In Augustine’s preaching, he conspicuously ignores the sacrifice of the martyrs and emphasizes their testimony. This testimony of the martyrs, which witnessed to eternal life, was the message from God. Augustine gives no evidence that he sees a Christian’s shedding of blood as having any expiating value. In fact, he says that “God does not delight in the shedding of

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<sup>66</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 300.2 (PL 38:1377). Christiani fuerunt: sed nomen Christianorum postea divulgatum factis antecesserunt.

<sup>67</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 300.3 (PL 38:1377). Testamentum enim vetus velatio est novi Testamenti, et Testamentum novum revelatio est veteris Testamenti.

<sup>68</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 300.5 (PL 38:1379). Ipsum martyres in manifesto confessi sunt, quem tunc Machabaei in occulto confessi sunt: mortui sunt isti pro Christo in Evangelio revelato; mortui sunt illi pro Christi nomine in lege velato. Christus habet utrosque, Christus pugnantes adiuvit utrosque, Christus coronavit utrosque.

blood.”<sup>69</sup> Augustine truncates the received traditions of martyrdom to a vision of witness bearing that he believes is faithful to the New Testament and useful for his congregation.

### Augustine’s Use of Sacrificial Language

Occasionally, however, Augustine did use sacrificial language, and it would be disingenuous not to note those instances. When preaching on the feast day of Peter and Paul on June 29, 404, he could not avoid the sacrificial language since he was preaching from inspired Scripture instead of a martyr text. Quoting 2 Timothy 4:6 “For I am already on the point of being sacrificed [*immolor*],” Augustine admits, “[Paul] knew that his suffering [*passionem*] would be a sacrifice to God.” At first glance this use of sacrificial language seems out of character for Augustine. Augustine makes, however, an unexpected point with this text. Emphasizing the passive voice of the verb *immolor*, Augustine claims that Paul did not willingly offer himself but was offered by someone else. He says, “Those who killed him did not offer such sacrifice to the Father, but it was that high priest who had said, ‘Do not fear those who slay the body.’”<sup>70</sup> Augustine claims that Paul did not make a willing sacrifice but that Jesus willingly sacrificed Paul.

Preaching on this same text about fifteen years later, Augustine notes that though martyrdom is a sacrifice, technically the martyr sacrifices nothing since he did not have anything good to give but what God had already provided. Embracing a view of God that will make some modern readers uncomfortable, Augustine preaches, “So he [God] made the sacrificial victims for himself, he himself devoted the sacrifices to himself, he himself filled the martyrs with the

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<sup>69</sup>E.g. Aug. *Serm.* 306E.6.

<sup>70</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 299A.4 (PLS 2:463). Audite quid dicat idem apostolus : *Ego enim iam immolor, vel libor* — aliqui codices *libor* habent, aliqui *immolor* : libari et immolari ad sacrificium pertinet — : *passionem suam sacrificium esse nouerat deo. Non illi qui occidebant, sed ille offerebat patri tale sacrificium sacerdos qui dixerat: Ne timueritis eos qui corpus occidunt.*

Spirit, he himself equipped the confessors with strength. Certainly it was to them he said, ‘For you are not the one who speaks.’”<sup>71</sup> In this way, Augustine takes on the language of the martyrs’ sacrifice and bends it until it is no sacrifice of the martyrs’ at all. Instead he turns it squarely back to martyrdom as bearing witness to the divine work of Christ in the martyrs’ lives.

In his last years, however, Augustine may have begun to accommodate his language to reflect some of that sacrificial tradition of martyrdom. In 428, just a couple of years before his death, a weary and disappointed Augustine complains about the turn out for Peter and Paul’s feast.

Really, we should have been celebrating the feast of such great martyrs, that is of the holy apostles Peter and Paul, with a much bigger crowd than this. After all, if we flock in big crowds to the celebration of the birthdays of lambs, how much more should we do so for those of the rams?<sup>72</sup>

Here Augustine calls the apostles “rams” and the other martyrs “lambs,” the animals most closely identified with sacrifice. Perhaps in his old age, Augustine had softened to notions of sacrifice in martyrdom. Perhaps with the Donatist threat receding, Augustine did not feel that he had to be as guarded when speaking of the martyrs. Perhaps, though, this reference to sheep does not indicate sacrificial language.<sup>73</sup>

Augustine often alludes to sheep and lambs in sermons on Peter and Paul. When speaking of Peter, Augustine often quotes the words of Jesus to Peter: “Feed my lambs” (John

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<sup>71</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 299.3 (PL 38:1368). Ipse ergo sibi victimas fecit, ipse sibi sacrificia dicavit, ipse implevit Spiritu martyres, ipse virtute instruxit confessores. Eis quippe dixit, *Non enim vos estis qui loquimini.*

<sup>72</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 298.1 (PL 38:1365). Debuimus quidem tantorum martyrum diem, hoc est, sanctorum apostolorum Petri et Pauli maiore frequentia celebrare. Si enim celebramus frequentissime natalitia agnorum, quanto magis debemus arietum? (Trans. Edmund Hill.)

<sup>73</sup>Of course it is impossible to reconstruct the secret thoughts of any person, but I ask the reader to humor me in this harmless speculation.

21:15-17).<sup>74</sup> When speaking of Paul, Augustine calls Ananias, the man to whom God sent Paul after his conversion, a sheep. Augustine enjoys this metaphor because he claims Saul the “wolf” had to visit Ananias the “sheep” for healing.<sup>75</sup> Though Augustine uses neither of these examples in his sermon in 428, these favored illustrations possibly influenced his speech due to familiarity. Perhaps Augustine was not using sacrificial language but was incorporating the martyrs into the “flock,” that is the Church.<sup>76</sup> In a sermon on Cyprian in 405, Augustine preaches, “The blessed apostles, the first rams of the holy flock, saw the Lord Jesus himself hanging [on the cross].”<sup>77</sup> The apostles were the “rams” because they were first in authority in the “flock,” certainly not because they were first to be martyred. In 428, Augustine notes this fact when he explains that Stephen, martyred before Peter, was dependant on Peter.<sup>78</sup>

### Conclusion

In his sermons, Augustine breaks with the previous traditions concerning martyrdom. While the martyr texts indicate a multiplicity of functions and meanings for martyrdom, Augustine forsakes all meanings except that of New Testament testifying. This is no mere theological quibble. It provides Augustine with the means to reinvent the martyrdom experience for his North African congregation, who had little experience with persecution in a post-

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<sup>74</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 295.4,5; 296.1; 299.7; 299A.3; 299B.2.

<sup>75</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 175.8; 279.2; 295.6; 299C.3. In three of these sermons, Augustine actually claims that the name Ananias is derived from the Hebrew for sheep. This, however, is a false etymology. Edmund Hill wonders why Jerome never “corrected Augustine’s fantasy.” He goes on to say, “The suspicion begins to cross my mind that he [Augustine] quite brazenly invented this ‘meaning’ of the name Ananias, in order to be able to talk of the wolf ... being brought to the sheep for healing and transformation” (Hill, *Sermons (273-305A)*, 69, n.8).

<sup>76</sup>I will return to Augustine’s incorporation of the martyrs into the Church in chapter four.

<sup>77</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 311.2 (PL 38.1414). Primi beati Apostoli arietes gregis sancti, ipsum Dominum Iesum viderunt pendentem.

<sup>78</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 298.1.

Constantine age. On the other hand it also allowed him to distinguish his communion from that of the Donatists, who derived their foundational narrative from the martyrs and who often found themselves experiencing various levels of persecution because of their refusal to recognize the Catholic hierarchy.

## CHAPTER 3

### AUGUSTINE, THE DONATISTS, AND VOLUNTARY MARTYRDOM

Even in antiquity, the most controversial aspect of Christian martyrdom was voluntary, or suicide, martyrdom. The sources indicate that many of the Christians who died for their faith actually had a hand in the events. The tradition of voluntary martyrdom emphasized the willing sacrifice of the martyr, along with Roman ideas concerning noble death. Augustine, however, believed that suicide was an unacceptable expression of martyrdom. In his sermons, he even questioned the idea of the martyr's willingness. The Donatists of North Africa approved of voluntary martyrdom, and Augustine uses the feast day sermon to highlight the difference between the Donatists and his vision for the North African churches.

#### **Voluntary Martyrdom in the Christian Tradition**

In the early church, voluntary martyrdom comprised three types, each with varying levels of approval. First, the most controversial form of voluntary martyrdom was that of those martyrs who were so overcome by events that they caused their own deaths. During the reign of Marcus Aurelius, Carpus and Papyrus died martyrs' deaths. While watching their martyrdoms, Agathonike, a bystander, believed that she should join them on the pyre. The crowd tried to dissuade her after she announced her intentions. They reminded her that her son needed her. She replied that God would take care of him, at which point she disrobed and threw herself on

the fire.<sup>79</sup> In the fourth century, the ecclesiastical historian Eusebius records similar instances. An elderly woman in Alexandria named Apollonia had all her teeth broken out in a time of persecution. Her persecutors threatened to burn her if she did not join in their “impious cries,” but they released her when she begged. After her release, however, she “leaped eagerly into the fire and was consumed.”<sup>80</sup> Eusebius also describes mass voluntary martyrdom in Nicomedia, when persecution broke out there. He writes, “It is reported that with a certain divine and indescribable eagerness men and women rushed into the fire.”<sup>81</sup> This hysteria for martyrdom elicited concern from many bishops, most notably Clement of Alexandria. The texts that preserve these tales of self-sacrifice, however, speak of these voluntary martyrs with warm approbation. Eusebius and the other recorders of their martyrdoms viewed these martyrs as heroes. Their sacrifices demonstrated their strength of character.

The second type of voluntary martyrs accomplished their goals by forcing the authorities to execute them. In 304 in Catania on the island of Sicily, the deacon Euplius walked up to the Roman prefect’s chamber yelling, “I am a Christian, and I desire to die for the name of Christ.”<sup>82</sup> He even brought copies of the gospels with him in order to prove how worthy he is of martyrdom. The writer of this martyrology obviously admires Euplius for his rash willingness,

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<sup>79</sup>*Martyrdom of Carpus, Papyrus, and Agathonike* 44, in *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 22-37. In the Latin recension of the text Agathonike is arrested with the other two martyrs, which leads Musurillo to suggest that “the Latin redactor was attempting to colour the facts for a later age” (Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, xvi).

<sup>80</sup>Eus. *Historia ecclesiastica* 6.41. συντόνως ἐπεπήδησεν εἰς τὸ πῦρ, καὶ καταπέφλεκται (trans. NPNF<sup>2</sup>)

<sup>81</sup>Eus. *HE* 8.6. ὅτε λόγος ἔχει προθυμία θεία τινὶ καὶ ἀρρήτῳ ἄνδρα ἅμα γυναῖξιν ἐπὶ τὴν πυρὰν καθάλεσθαι (trans. NPNF<sup>2</sup>).

<sup>82</sup>*Acta Eupli* 1.1 in *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 310-319. Christianus sum, et pro Christi nomine mori desidero.

and he also emphasizes the sacrificial nature of martyrdom in Euplius's story. When the governor tells Euplius that he can go free if only he would sacrifice, Euplius replies, "I only sacrifice myself to Christ my God."<sup>83</sup> As with many texts, the strands of martyrdom and sacrifice are bound closely together and they strengthen the validity of the voluntary martyrdom.

Eusebius also strengthens these bonds when he writes about the martyrdom of Apphianus. Apphianus lived with Eusebius at the time of his martyrdom, and, as noted earlier, Eusebius calls this friend "innocent lamb." Eusebius recollects that Apphianus attacked the governor of Palestine in order to keep the governor from offering libations to the pagan gods. This rash action precipitated his martyrdom. Eusebius indicates that the governor and his entourage did not care for Apphianus's disruption: "Thereupon, [Apphianus], and that instant, as might have been expected after so bold a deed, was torn by the governor and those who were with him as if by wild beasts."<sup>84</sup>

While both the direct and indirect forms of voluntary martyrdom had a number of critics, Christians almost universally approved of the third type of voluntary martyrdom. They viewed Christian women who wanted to protect their virtue as justified in taking their own lives. Eusebius tells of a woman who believed that soldiers would rape her and her two daughters. The mother convinced her daughters that their only escape was to flee to Christ. The three made an excuse to get some privacy and killed themselves by jumping into a river that was

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<sup>83</sup>*Acta Eupli* 2.6. Calvisianus praefectus dixit: Sacrifica, si vis liberari. Euplius dixit: Sacrifico modo Christo Deo me.

<sup>84</sup>*Eus. Mart. Pal.* 4.10. Ἐπὶ τούτοις ὁ περὶ οὗ ὁ λόγος, παραχρήμα μὲν, ὅσα εἰκὸς αὐτὸν, ὡς ἂν ἐπὶ τοιούτῳ τολμήματι θηρῶν δίκην ἀγρίων πρὸς τῶν ἀμφὶ τὸν ἡγεμόνα διασπαρχθεῖς (trans. NPNF<sup>2</sup>).

flowing by.<sup>85</sup> Eusebius also tells the story of a prefect's wife in Rome, who committed suicide after her husband consented to allow Maxentius access to her.

Having requested a little time for adorning her body, she entered her chamber and being alone, stabbed herself with a sword. Dying immediately, she left her corpse to those who had come for her. And by her deeds, more powerfully than by any words, she has shown to all men now and hereafter that the virtue which prevails among Christians is the only invincible and indestructible possession.<sup>86</sup>

These women willingly died as a testimony to the importance Christians placed on sexual purity.

The idea of the willing sacrifice was so compelling that martyrologies often depict martyrs who did not necessarily offer themselves up as sharing the same qualities as voluntary martyrs. Many martyr texts portray Christians who did not seek death as willingly embracing it. The chronicler of Polycarp's martyrdom explicitly states, "We do not approve of those who come forward by themselves,"<sup>87</sup> however, just before this statement of reticence, the same author lauds a certain Germanicus for his perseverance in martyrdom because "he drew the beast to himself by force, planning to depart more quickly this unjust and lawless life."<sup>88</sup> The chronicler emphasizes Germanicus's willing embrace of death. Similarly, Perpetua's passion, which equates martyrdom with a second baptism, depicts Perpetua as a voluntary martyr, even though she did not offer herself to the authorities. "She howled as she was struck to the bone, and she

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<sup>85</sup>Eus. *HE* 8.12.

<sup>86</sup>Eus. *HE* 8.14. λαβόντας αὐτὴν ἄγειν ἐπιτρέψαντα, ἐς βραχὺν ὑποπαραιτησαμένη ὡς ἂν ἤδη κατακοσμηθεῖ τὸ σῶμα, εἴσεισιν ἐπὶ τοῦ ταμείου, καὶ μονωθεῖσα, ξίφος καθ' ἑαυτῆς πήγνυσι· θανούσά τε παραχρῆμα, τὸν μὲν νεκρὸν τοῖς προαγωγοῖς καταλιμπάνει, ἔργοις δ' αὐτοῖς ἀπάσης φωνῆς γεγωνότεροις, ὅτι μόνον χρημάτων ἀήττητόν τε καὶ ἀνώλεθρον ἢ παρὰ Χριστιανοῖς ἀρετὴ πέφυκεν, εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους τοὺς τε νῦν ὄντας καὶ τοὺς μετὰ ταῦτα γενησομένους ἐξέφηνε (trans. NPNF<sup>2</sup>).

<sup>87</sup>*Mart. Polycarp* 4.1. οὐκ ἐπαινοῦμεν τοὺς προσιόντας ἑαυτοῖς, ἐπειδὴ οὐχ οὕτως διδάσκει τὸ εὐαγγέλιον.

<sup>88</sup>*Mart. Polycarp* 3.1. ἑαυτῷ ἐπεσπάσατο τὸ θηρίον προσβιασάμενος, τάχιον τοῦ ἀδίκου καὶ ἀνόμου βίου αὐτῶν ἀπαλλαγῆναι βουλόμενος.

moved the uncertain hand of the young gladiator to her throat. Perhaps so great a woman, who was feared by the unclean spirit, could not be killed otherwise unless she herself were willing.”<sup>89</sup>

The martyrs had to be willing in order for their deaths to be martyrdoms.<sup>90</sup>

Some scholars suppose that Roman ideas regarding suicide helped influence the martyr phenomenon.<sup>91</sup> Roman culture on the whole approved of suicide. The act conveyed dignity and strength of character in the Roman milieu, and Romans viewed suicide as justifying the moral position of the one performing it.<sup>92</sup> Tertullian, the earliest of the Latin fathers, explicitly incorporates this Roman view of self death into his theology of martyrdom. In a passage reminiscent of the “cloud of witnesses” in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, Tertullian lauds the Greco-Roman notables who died by their own hands.

Let the spirit set clearly before both itself and the flesh, how these things, though exceedingly painful, have yet been calmly endured by many, and, have even been eagerly desired for the sake of fame and glory; and this not only in the case of men, but of women too, that you, O holy women, may be worthy of your sex. It would take me too long to enumerate one by one the men who at their own self-impulse have put an end to themselves. As to women, there is a famous case at hand: the violated Lucretia, in the

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<sup>89</sup>*Passio Perp.* 21.9-10. Perpetua autem [...] inter ossa conpuncta exululavit, et errantem dexteram tirunculi gladiatoris ipsa in iugulum suum transtulit. fortasse tanta femina aliter non potuisset occidi, quae ab inmundo spiritu timebatur, nisi ipsa voluisset.

<sup>90</sup>Droge and Tabor think this trope of willingness appropriate because they believe that all martyrs should be viewed as voluntary martyrs. They claim that the requirements the authorities placed on the Christians were minimal, so no Christian would have died against his or her will. See Droge and Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 1992), 133. Droge writes with the agenda to remove any stigma from suicide, and casting all martyrdom as suicide is an attempt to further that agenda. More will be said on some of Droge’s more questionable claims later in this chapter.

<sup>91</sup>Most notably, Bowersock advocates the primacy of Rome’s role in the creation of martyrdom. He writes, “Without the glorification of suicide in the Roman tradition, the development of martyrdom in the second and third centuries would have been unthinkable. The hordes of voluntary martyrs would never have existed. Both Greek and Jewish traditions stood against them” (Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 72). Bowersock’s thesis is a bit reductionistic and does not account for some of the evidence of volunteering found in the eastern traditions. Bowersock does, however, emphasize a single strand that no doubt made up some of the tapestry of martyrdom.

<sup>92</sup>See Catherine Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) for an overview of Roman attitudes towards a variety of kinds of death.

presence of her kinsfolk, plunged the knife into herself, that she might have glory for her chastity. Mucius burned his right hand on an altar, that this deed of his might dwell in fame. The philosophers have been out-stripped, for instance Heraclitus, who, smeared with cowdung, burned himself; and Empedocles, who leapt down into the fires of Aetna; and Peregrinus, who not long ago threw himself on the funeral pile. For women even have despised the flames. Dido did so, lest, after the death of a husband very dear to her, she should be compelled to marry again; and so did the wife of Hasdrubal, who, Carthage being on fire, that she might not behold her husband suppliant at Scipio's feet, rushed with her children into the conflagration, in which her native city was destroyed. [... and Regulus, ... and Cleopatra, ... and the Athenian courtesan, ... and the Spartan youths ...]<sup>93</sup>

He admonishes Christians that if pagans could die well for their lesser causes of fame and glory, Christians should have even greater motivation to do likewise in order to “obtain a celestial glory and a divine reward.”<sup>94</sup>

### Augustine on Suicide

Augustine, however, held very different attitudes towards suicide. He believed suicide was a sin Christians must avoid. Augustine was not the first to condemn suicide and voluntary martyrdom. He followed the lead of Clement of Alexandria who wrote at the end of the second century. Clement vigorously opposed voluntary martyrdom and emphasized the martyrs' witness at the expense of their sacrifice.<sup>95</sup> He even proposed that martyrdom did not necessarily

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<sup>93</sup>Tert. *Ad Martyras* 4.3-8. Sed spiritus contra ponat sibi et carni: acerba licet ista, a multis tamen aequo animo excepta, immo et ultro appetita, famae et gloriae causa; nec a viris tantum, sed etiam a feminis, ut vos quoque, benedictae, sexui vestro respondeatis. Longum est, si enumerem singulos, qui se gladio confecerint, animo suo ducti. De feminis ad manum est Lucretia, quae vim stupri passa cultrum sibi adigit in conspectu propinquorum, ut gloriam castitati suae pareret. Mucius dexteram suam in ara cremavit, ut hoc factum eius fama haberet. Nec minus fecerunt philosophi: Heraclitus, qui se bubulo stercore oblitum excussit; item Empedocles, qui in ignes Aetnaei montis desilivit; et Peregrinus, qui non olim se rogo immisit, cum feminae quoque contempserint ignes: Dido, ne post virum delictissimum nubere cogeretur; item Asdrubalis uxor, quae iam ardente Carthagine, ne maritum suum supplicem Scipionis videret, cum filiis suis in incendium patriae devolvit (trans. ANF).

<sup>94</sup>Tert. *Ad Martyras* 4.9. ad consecutionem gloriae caelestis et divinae mercedis

<sup>95</sup>Bowersock posits Clement as a foil to Tertullian and claims that Clement “had absorbed the philosophy of Plato” (Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 66). Bowersock uses this contrast to support his thesis that martyrdom was Roman and that Greek culture was against it. Though elements of Platonism exist in Clement's thought, his arguments are more shaped by his exegesis of the Bible than of Plato.

have to lead to death. Clement taught that martyrdom bears witness to faith in God and that every Christian obedient in deed and conscience is a martyr.<sup>96</sup>

Augustine's magnum opus, *City of God*, contains his classic condemnation of suicide. Augustine argues that suicide is a sin because it is self-murder and that it is never right to commit a sin even if trying to avoid another sin or someone else's sin. He claims, "Indeed, he who kills himself is a murderer. He is the more guilty when he kills himself, the more innocent he is of the reason for which he considered himself needing death."<sup>97</sup> Martyrs of course were innocent of wrongdoing; therefore, Augustine rejects the appropriateness of voluntary martyrdom. According to Augustine, the voluntary martyrs place themselves in a catch-22. They are either justly guilty of the crime or justly guilty of murder. Augustine acknowledges that many Christians did indeed engage in voluntary martyrdom, but he claims that they should not be emulated. He writes, "We are not merely asking whether it has been done, but whether it ought to have been done. Certainly sound reason should be preferred to examples."<sup>98</sup>

Augustine even attacks self-destruction to protect chastity, the one form of voluntary martyrdom with widespread support. Even so, he hesitates to break tradition by condemning those women whom the churches venerated for protecting their virtue.

But, they say, in the time of persecution some holy women escaped those who menaced them with outrage, by casting themselves into rivers which they knew would drown them; and having died in this manner, they are venerated in the Catholic Church as martyrs. Of such persons I do not presume to speak rashly. I cannot tell whether there may not have been vouchsafed to the Church some divine authority, proved by trustworthy evidences, for so honoring their memory: it may be that it is so. It may be they were not

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<sup>96</sup>Clement *Strom.* 4.4; 15.3.

<sup>97</sup>Aug. *De civitate Dei* 1.17. profecto etiam qui se ipsum occidit homicida est, et tanto fit nocentior, cum se occiderit, quanto innocentior in ea causa fuit, qua se occidendum putavit.

<sup>98</sup>Aug. *Civ. Dei* 1.22. Non modo quaerimus utrum sit factum, sed utrum fuerit faciendum. Sana quippe ratio etiam exemplis anteponenda est.

deceived by human judgment, but prompted by divine wisdom, to their act of self-destruction. We know that this was the case with Samson.<sup>99</sup>

Augustine believed that a proper view of martyrdom trumped the churches' endorsement of sexual renunciation.<sup>100</sup> Augustine explicitly claims that Christian women should not hold Tertullian's beloved Lucretia as a proper example. Though Tarquin's son violated her, she remained chaste because of her unwillingness. She should not have killed herself, the innocent party.<sup>101</sup> Augustine claims that chastity is a matter of the heart and does not hinge on the sexual violence perpetrated by others.<sup>102</sup> Women who were sexually assaulted should be viewed as innocent victims by the churches, not as those who must atone for their shame by suicide. Indeed, Augustine believed, they had no shame.

Arthur Droge, who disapproves of Augustine's condemnation of suicide, believes that Augustine's dismissal of voluntary martyrdom rests solely on Platonic influences.<sup>103</sup> Augustine bases his disapproval of suicide, however, on his belief that suicide is sin, a belief absent in

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<sup>99</sup>Aug. *Civ. Dei* 1.26. Sed quaedam, inquit, sanctae feminae tempore persecutionis, ut insectatores suae pudicitiae devitarent, in rapturum atque necaturum se fluvium proiecerunt eoque modo defunctae sunt earumque martyria in catholica ecclesia ueneratione celeberrima frequentantur. De his nihil temere audeo iudicare. Utrum enim ecclesiae aliquibus fide dignis testificationibus, ut earum memoriam sic honoret, diuina persuaserit auctoritas, nescio; et fieri potest ut ita sit. Quid si enim hoc fecerunt, non humanitus deceptae, sed diuinitus iussae, nec errantes, sed oboedientes? sicut de Samsone aliud nobis fas non est credere (trans. NPNF<sup>1</sup>).

<sup>100</sup>For more on Augustine's views on sexual renunciation and martyrdom see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 397.

<sup>101</sup>Aug. *Civ. Dei* 1.19.

<sup>102</sup>Indeed, Augustine seems to indicate that chastity is a matter of the heart in all circumstances, whether sexual activity is consensual or not. In his sermons on Perpetua and Felicity, he never shies away from their non-virginal status as wives and mothers, e.g., *Serm.* 281.2,3; 282.2. Even so, he describes Perpetua as "chaste" in *Serm.* 280.1.

<sup>103</sup>Droge, *Noble Death*, 175.

pagan Platonists.<sup>104</sup> Augustine grounds his conclusions regarding the inappropriateness of voluntary martyrdom on the Bible, though Droge claims that Augustine's exegesis is dishonest: "On occasion he [Augustine] reads into the text ideas that are not present; at other times he denies what the text explicitly say."<sup>105</sup>

Droge's own interpretations, however, leave much to be desired. Droge lists eight examples of biblical figures who took their own lives. He claims that Augustine did not address these texts when teaching that the Bible provides no support for voluntary martyrdom. Droge asks, "What happened to Saul, Zimri, and Razis? All three killed themselves in order to avoid falling into the hands of their enemies. For obvious reasons Augustine consigns them to silence."<sup>106</sup> Augustine does mention Razis, the elder of Jerusalem, who in 2 Maccabees turns his sword against himself after being cornered by five hundred soldiers. Augustine thinks it significant that Razis had no escape available to him, but he also claims that the text merely narrates the Razis's suicide without praising it.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, Augustine points out that 2 Maccabees does not carry the same level of canonicity as the rest of the Old Testament.<sup>108</sup>

Droge implies that Augustine ignores the tales of Saul and Zimri because they would refute his thesis. Actually the "obvious reason" he ignores them is because no Christian would consider imitating them. Saul and Zimri were kings who did not walk in the ways of God.

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<sup>104</sup>P. W. Van der Horst, "A Pagan Platonist and a Christian Platonist on Suicide," *Vigiliae Christianae* 25 (1971): 282-288.

<sup>105</sup>Droge, *Noble Death*, 171.

<sup>106</sup>Droge, *Noble Death*, 176.

<sup>107</sup>Aug. *Contra Gaudentius* 37. The author of 2 Macc obviously admires Razis. Augustine may be cutting his exegesis too fine when he points out that Razis was not specifically praised for his death.

<sup>108</sup>Aug. *Contra Gaud.* 38.

Droge's other examples prove equally compelling. Saul's armor-bearer fell on his own sword; Abimelech, who had murdered his seventy brothers, asks his armor-bearer to kill him after suffering a fatal head wound from a woman; and Judas hung himself after betraying Jesus. Why would Droge think that Augustine or his flock would consider these examples as biblical support for voluntary death? Besides Razis, whose authority Augustine questioned, Samson alone is a biblical hero who takes his own life. Augustine notes, however, that he is an exception because he had a divine imperative to do so. Regarding all these examples, Droge writes, "Despite Augustine's claim to the contrary, these individuals killed themselves *in order to avoid shame and dishonor*."<sup>109</sup> Augustine, however, believed that eternal shame came from avoiding temporal shame and dishonor. According to Augustine, by enduring the shame and dishonor, martyrs manifested the humility that warranted their position of honor in the church.

### **Augustine on Reluctance for Martyrdom**

Voluntary martyrdom hinged on the "willingness" of the martyr. The martyr texts laud the willingness of the martyrs to face their own deaths. Even the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which probably dates to the early second century, claims that Christians who embrace martyrdom willingly will enjoy greater heavenly rewards than those who faithfully suffer after trying to avoid it.<sup>110</sup> Tertullian at one point goes so far as to say that Christians must not flee from martyrdom. They are obliged to face persecution and death.<sup>111</sup>

In spite of Tertullian's extreme views, most Christian communities, even in North Africa, understood that limits existed to Christian willingness to die. Cyprian, the bishop of

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<sup>109</sup>Droge, *Noble Death*, 175—italics in original.

<sup>110</sup>*Shepherd of Hermas* Sim. 9.105.4-5.

<sup>111</sup>Tert. *Scorpiace* 8.

Carthage, was executed in 258, but before his martyrdom he fled from the persecution in order to preserve leadership for his flock. Even when confronted by the proconsul Paternus, Cyprian claimed, “Our way of life forbids that anyone voluntarily offer himself.”<sup>112</sup> Other evidence in Cyprian’s martyr text, however, tempers this statement of reticence for martyrdom: “After [Cyprian’s] sentence, his supporters said, ‘Let us be beheaded with him too!’”<sup>113</sup> Augustine follows the example of Cyprian rather than that of Cyprian’s supporters. He often quotes Cyprian’s words when celebrating his feast day.<sup>114</sup>

Augustine’s emphasis on the martyrs’ testimony makes their willingness to die less important. In spite of what many martyr texts claim, Augustine taught his flock that the martyrs did not long for death at all; rather, they longed for life. In a sermon on the birthday of Peter and Paul in 418, Augustine claims, “Death cannot be loved; it can only be endured.”<sup>115</sup> After all, Augustine continues, if death were enjoyable for the martyrs then their feats of faith would be commonplace: “If we saw them delighting themselves at banquets, would we call them great men? would call them courageous men?”<sup>116</sup> Augustine teaches his congregation that the martyrs unwillingly submitted to death because they loved life so much. Temporal death gave way to

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<sup>112</sup>*Acta Cypriani* 1.5, in *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 168-175. *disciplina prohibeat nostra ne quis se ultro offerat.*

<sup>113</sup>*Acta Cypriani* 5.1. *Post eius sententiam populus fratrum dicebat: Et nos cum eo decollemur.*

<sup>114</sup>*Aug. Serm.* 313E.5.

<sup>115</sup>*Aug. Serm.* 299.8 (PL 38:1373). *Amari mors non potest, tolerari potest.*

<sup>116</sup>*Aug. Serm.* 299.8 (PL 38:1373). *Nam si amator, nihil magnum fecerunt qui eam pro fide susceperunt. Numquid se eos laetari videremus in conviviis, diceremus magnos viros, diceremus fortes viros?* It is interesting to note that this reflects Augustine’s complaint that the martyrs’ feast days became times of partying rather than times of pious reflection.

eternal life. Indeed, this is why Christians called the martyrs' death days their birthdays. Their martyrdom was their birth into eternal life.

### **Augustine on Donatism's Voluntary Martyrs**

Augustine did not form his condemnation of voluntary martyrdom for theoretical purposes. The issue was still current in his day. The Donatists of North Africa embraced the tradition of voluntary martyrdom, and they engaged in all three types. Donatists did not find the idea of voluntary martyrdom repugnant; rather, they viewed an active struggle against oppression as noble. They had precedents for their views on voluntary martyrdom in Tertullian and many martyr texts. In many ways, they preserved the tradition of martyrdom that had been passed down from the pre-Constantinian Christianity.

Evidence exists that the Donatists engaged in all three kinds of voluntary martyrdom. In the Donatist *Passion of Maximian and Isaac*, Maximian instigates the events that would lead to his martyrdom. The writer claims:

With the speed not of feet but of a well-prepared mind, [Maximian] quickly sprang up on his own to incite this contest. He scattered the dismal little pieces [of the imperial edict] with his rapid hands just as if he were tearing the devil limb from limb. Immediately he was taken up to the tribunal.<sup>117</sup>

In the Donatist literature, women embrace martyrdom in order to protect their virginity. In the *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs*, Victoria throws herself off of a cliff in order to avoid an unwanted marriage.<sup>118</sup> In *The Passion of Saints Maxima, Donatilla and Secunda*, Secunda similarly jumps from her window in order to avoid marriage and joins some passing Christians on their way to

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<sup>117</sup>*Passio Maximiani and Isaac* (PL 8:769a). Sed quid pluribus callidae mentis celeritate nec pedum protinus fore certamen ultro provocaturus ascendit, et funestos apices tamquam diaboli ibi membra discerneret, manu rapida dissipavit. Inde confestim raptus ad tribunal (trans. Tilley).

<sup>118</sup>*Acta Saturnini* 14. The fall does not harm Victoria, but her intention was death.

their deaths.<sup>119</sup> The Circumcellions, a group of Donatist extremists, had reputations for dying by their own hands in their pursuit of martyrdom.<sup>120</sup> These extremists operated outside the Donatist hierarchy, but Donatist bishops occasionally used them to attack Catholic buildings and holy sites. The Circumcellions harassed magistrates asking for martyrdom and sometimes committing suicide if the magistrates refused to give them the death penalty.<sup>121</sup> Circumcellions also had a proclivity for jumping off cliffs in their pursuit of martyrdom.<sup>122</sup> Even though this group operated on the fringe of Donatist life, in his sermons, Augustine attacks them when speaking on the Donatist toleration of voluntary martyrdom.

In his sermon delivered on Cyprian's feast day September 4, 410, Augustine embarks on a sustained assault on his Donatist enemies that focuses on their conception of martyrdom. In this sermon, Augustine tells his listeners that voluntary martyrs, like the Circumcellions, are not martyrs at all because they do not heed the proper examples. Augustine sharply criticizes his opponents, saying, "The Donatists, who falsely boast that they belong to Cyprian, [...] if they paid attention to his martyrdom, they wouldn't cast themselves [off cliffs]."<sup>123</sup> Augustine maintains that true martyrs would follow the example of Cyprian who waited for his persecutors to come to him. In doing this, he imitated Christ, who waited for the guards to seize Him in the

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<sup>119</sup>*Passio Maximae Secundae et Donatillae* 22.

<sup>120</sup>Scholars debate how deserved this reputation may be. I believe that there must be at least a kernel of truth to Augustine's claims or else his congregation would not have viewed his attacks on them as credible.

<sup>121</sup>Frend, "Donatus 'paene totam Africam decepit'. How?" *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 48 (1997): 616.

<sup>122</sup>For the jumping motif in Donatist sources, see Victoria and Secunda above and *The Martyrdom of Marculus* in Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories* (though Marculus was pushed).

<sup>123</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 313E.2 (PLS 2:616). Donatistae, qui se ad Cyprianum falso iactant pertinere, [...] si martyrium [eius attenderent], non se praecipitent.

garden.<sup>124</sup> By following this line of argument, Augustine claims that the Donatists are failing to follow the example of both the founder of Christianity and the supposed founder of their sect. Furthermore, Augustine attacks the Donatist “jumping” motif directly, claiming that it is not an avenue to martyrdom but that its origin is demonic. He reminds his hearers of the story of Satan’s tempting Jesus on the pinnacle of the temple. Satan encourages Jesus to hurl Himself down so that the angels will save Him, an act that would prove Jesus’ status as the Son of God. Jesus refuses, telling Satan that it is not proper to test God. Augustine believes that Donatists who jump to their deaths fall for this same temptation. He claims, “For the devil is also suggesting to the Donatists, saying, ‘Cast yourselves down, the angels will catch you; with such a death you do not go to punishment, but you proceed to a crown.’”<sup>125</sup> Thus, Augustine claims that these so-called martyrs are not even Christians because in jumping from cliffs they listen to the devil. The harshness of Augustine’s critique evinces the sense of urgency he felt. His audience needed to understand the dangers of aligning with a shadow church.

Not only do these voluntary martyrs follow the wrong examples, but according to Augustine they also lack patience, the Christian virtue necessary for avoiding suicide. Patience allowed the martyrs to endure the ills and hardships inflicted on them. Augustine contrasts this patience with impatience, which is an unwillingness to endure hardship.<sup>126</sup> Augustine accuses Donatist voluntary martyrs of demonstrating their impatience by preferring to end their lives rather than endure the hardships of governmental oppression or marriage.

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<sup>124</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 313E.4. It is interesting to note Augustine’s use of Jesus as a prototypical martyr in this and other sermons.

<sup>125</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 313E.4 (PLS 2:618). Hoc enim et Donatistis diabolus suggerit dicens: Praecipitate vos, angeli vos suscipiunt; tali morte non itis ad poenam, sed pergitis ad coronam.

<sup>126</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 283.1 (Dolbeau 15). Etenim ut mala omnia pro fide martyres tolerarent, virtus eorum patientia nominatur.

## **Conclusion**

Augustine rejects all forms of voluntary martyrdom, but in doing this, he rejects many of the traditions of North African Christianity. He founds his break with tradition on the understanding that suicide is sin and that the purpose of martyrdom was New Testament witness bearing. If martyrdom bore witness to the Christian's love of life, how could the Christian rush headlong into death? The Donatists, on the other hand, held fast to the traditions they had received. Augustine's break with the traditions of Tertullian and others allowed him to widen the divide between Catholics and Donatists, compelling the average North African to pick a side in the struggle.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE IMPORTANCE OF SPECTACLE, SUFFERING, AND CAUSE IN MARTYRDOM

Martyr passions became a form of holy entertainment in late antiquity. When the martyr heroes engaged in epic struggles with the forces of evil, Christians viewed these tales as their own spectacles that rivaled the spectacles of the arena and coliseum. Often the tales contained elements of humor, as the martyrs made their interrogators appear foolish through witty wordplay. These stories moved Christians through the full range of their emotions when humor gave way to gruesome depictions of torture and suffering. In the texts, the persecutors often pitted Christians against beasts and gladiators in the arena, reinforcing the link between martyrdom and spectacle. In the end, the martyr finished his or her contest well, dying as a faithful Christian despite the temptations of the Devil, and the listeners would rejoice in the defeat that signaled victory. Augustine approved of viewing martyrdom as holy spectacle, but he defined it so as to remove any doubt in his congregants that holy spectacle belonged only to the Catholics.

#### **The Holy Spectacle of Martyrdom**

Roman culture in late antiquity offered many spectacles for the public. Romans enjoyed watching the antics of gods and heroes at the theater. The excitement of the stadium's chariot races created special bonds among the supporters of certain teams. The gladiatorial

games of the arena both reflected and shaped Roman attitudes towards death.<sup>127</sup> These spectacles became integral parts of Roman life in late antiquity, and Christians used the language of these feats of strength and athleticism to describe their experience.

From the beginning, Christians viewed faith in terms of an athletic contest. The apostle Paul wrote, “For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men.”<sup>128</sup> Paul used this metaphor of the athletic contest for the interior life of faith frequently. The motif of the athlete in a spectacle also worked well for Christians who found themselves engaged in exterior struggles. When considering the deaths of Perpetua and Felicity, Augustine exclaims to his congregation, “What could be sweeter than this spectacle? What more courageous than this contest? What more glorious than this victory?”<sup>129</sup> When the church read aloud the *Passion of Perpetua*, the invisible struggle of faith that every believer experiences suddenly burst forth into the visible realm. As a crowd cheering the victorious gladiator, the congregation honored the martyrs who conquered death.

When these martyrs died, North Africans cheered for ignoble purposes. Augustine notes, however, with a sense of irony that now more North Africans cheer their deaths in order to honor them than cheered their deaths to mock them: “Neither then was the theater of cruelty filled with as great a crowd to kill them, as the one that now fills the church of piety to honor

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<sup>127</sup>For a detailed investigation of Roman attitudes towards the arena, see Edwards, *Death in Ancient Rome*, 46-77.

<sup>128</sup>1 Cor 4:9. δοκῶ γάρ, ὁ θεὸς ἡμᾶς τοὺς ἀποστόλους ἐσχάτους ἀπέδειξεν ὡς ἐπιθανατίους, ὅτι θεάτρον ἐγενήθημεν τῷ κόσμῳ καὶ ἀγγέλοις καὶ ἀνθρώποις.

<sup>129</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 280.2 (PL 38:1281). Quid hoc spectaculo suavius? quid hoc certamine fortius? quid hac victoria gloriosius?

them.”<sup>130</sup> The spectacle provided by the Roman persecutors failed to have the desired effect. While providing some transitory entertainment for a few “gentiles,” it should have slowed the growth of Christianity. The opposite occurred. Augustine believes that the spectacle was orchestrated by God in order to teach the North Africans and grow the Church.

Although the accounts of struggle and death made good stories and gave real pleasure at their recounting, according to Augustine, God did not give this holy spectacle merely for entertainment. Augustine emphasized the didactic element of the spectacle. After the reading of Saint Vincent’s passion on January 22, 411, Augustine says, “Our spirits have just taken in a great and very marvelous spectacle; it was not a wholly vain and pernicious pleasure that we derived from it, such as is usual in the theaters with all their tinsel triviality, but plainly a most useful and fruitful pleasure that we drank in with our inner eyes.”<sup>131</sup> The martyrologies taught the congregation the necessary virtues such as patience, and they reiterated Christianity’s central theme of conquering death.

Not only did martyrologies offer North African congregations edifying entertainment, these tales substituted for the traditional spectacles provided by Roman culture. Augustine was no supporter of the circuses. In a sermon probably preached on September 14, 401, at one of Cyprian’s shrines, Augustine rails against the traditional games and offers the martyrdom of Cyprian as a suitable substitute.

What evils vulgar, shameless curiosity is the cause of, the lust of the eyes, the avid craving for frivolous shows and spectacles, the madness of the stadiums, the fighting of contests for no reward! The charioteers compete for some prize; for what prize do the crowds fight over

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<sup>130</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 280.2 (PL 38:1281). Neque tunc tanto concursu hominum ad eos occidendos cavea crudelitatis impleta est, quanto nunc ad eos honorandos ecclesia pietatis impletur.

<sup>131</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 275.1 (PL 38:1254). Magnum et multum mirandum spectaculum noster animus cepit: nec inanissimam et perniciosissimam, sicut solet in theatris quarumque nugarum, sed plane utilissimam et fructuosissimam voluptatem oculis interioribus hausimus (trans. Hill).

the charioteers? But the charioteer delights them, the hunter delights them, the player delights them. Is this the way it is, then, that vile baseness delights the decent man? You can also change your consuming addiction to shows and spectacles; the Church is offering your mind more honest and venerable spectacles. Just now the passion of the blessed Cyprian was being read. We were listening with our ears, observing it all with our minds; we could see him competing, somehow or other we felt afraid for him in his deadly peril, but we were hoping God would help him.<sup>132</sup>

Augustine preached this sermon at one of Cyprian's shrines in Carthage, a city that provided a number of distractions for those so inclined. Augustine knew the allure that Carthage's traditional spectacles could have for a Christian. During his younger days in that city, his friend Alypius was addicted to the games. Only a rebuke from Augustine could cure him of his madness.<sup>133</sup>

Though admitting that they compel, Augustine attacks the baseness and frivolity of the shows. Augustine claims, however, that the recounting of Cyprian's martyrdom is equally compelling. Not only is the story instructive, but also it elicits an emotional response from the hearer. Augustine continues this sermon by offering proof that the holy spectacles are more worthy than the spectacles of the stadium.

Anyway, do you want to know, in a word, what the difference is between our shows and spectacles and those of the theaters? We, to the extent that we are of sound and healthy mind, would love to imitate the martyrs whose contests we are watching; we, I repeat, would love to imitate the martyrs whose contests we are watching. Decent spectator, when

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<sup>132</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 313A.3 (MA 1:68). Quae mala facit turpis curiositas, concupiscentia vana oculorum, aviditas nugacium spectaculorum, insania stadiorum, nullo praemio conflictus certaminum! Certant aurigae aliquo praemio: litigant pro aurigis populi quo praemio? Sed delectat auriga, delectat venator, delectat scenicus. Itane honestum delectat turpitude? Muta etiam cupiditatem spectaculorum: exhibet ecclesia menti tuae honorabiliora et veneranda spectacula. Modo legebatur passio beati Cypriani: aure audiebamus, mente spectabamus, certantem videbamus, periclitanti quodammodo timebamus, sed dei adiutorium sperabamus (trans. Hill).

<sup>133</sup>Aug. *Confessiones* 7.

you are watching a show in the theater, you're off your head if you have the audacity to imitate the performer you love.<sup>134</sup>

Gladiators and actors had dubious reputations, even among the pagan Romans. Christians, however, could be thrilled by the martyrs' victories and esteem them as most honored in the kingdom of heaven.

### **Martyrs as Athletes**

Given the spectacle of martyrdom, early Christians naturally came to view their martyrs as athletes engaged in a competition. In Roman society, however, all athletes were men. Martyrdom, which knew no preference of gender, included both men and women. The men became athletes. The women made the same shift, taking on Roman virtues of manliness.

The martyrs went into the arena as criminals, but once there, they played the part of the trained athlete. Not only did Christians view their martyrs in this light, but also the martyrs themselves often viewed their struggle as some sort of athletic competition. Before her martyrdom, Perpetua had a vision in which she sees her coming death in terms of a gladiatorial struggle.<sup>135</sup>

My clothes were stripped off, and suddenly I was a man. My seconds began to rub me down with oil (as they are wont to do before a contest). Then I saw the Egyptian on the other side rolling in the dust. Next there came forth a man of marvelous stature, such that he rose above the top of the amphitheatre. He was clad in a beltless purple tunic with two stripes (one on either side) running down the middle of his chest. He wore sandals that

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<sup>134</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 313A.3 (MA 1:68-69). Denique vultis nosse cito, quid intersit inter spectacula nostra et theatra? Nos, quantum in nobis viget sana mens, martyres, quos spectamus, cupimus imitari; nos, inquam, sanctos martyres, quos certantes spectamus, cupimus imitari. Honestè spectator, in theatris cum spectas, insanis, si audes imitari quem diligis (trans. Hill).

<sup>135</sup>Possibly the fashioning of Perpetua as a manly athlete is due entirely to the redactor of her passion. I believe, along with most scholars, that much of the text preserves the actual sentiments of Perpetua and that this fashioning is a self-fashioning.

were wondrously made of gold and silver, and he carried a wand like an athletic trainer and a green branch on which there were golden apples.<sup>136</sup>

After her vision, Perpetua claims, “I realized that it was not with wild animals that I would fight but with the Devil.”<sup>137</sup> This vision provides insight into the way some martyrs viewed their deaths. Perpetua saw herself as a trained fighter; in the vision she becomes a man in order to win the contest. Her adversary was the devil, symbolized by the Egyptian. Significantly, God, who makes his appearance as the giver of the contest, orchestrated the martyrdom itself.

In her vision, God gives Perpetua a branch when she overcomes the Egyptian.<sup>138</sup> Christians commonly referred to the reward of martyrdom as a crown, the kind of prize an athlete received after winning his competition. Thus as martyrs move from being criminals to athletes, the martyrdom itself moves from being punishment to an opportunity. Augustine tells his congregation, “He [God] instructed his athlete what to do, and set before him what he would receive.”<sup>139</sup> God did not send martyrdom as punishment, but as a chance to gain reward.

If God and the martyr view the martyrdom as an athletic contest, Christians ought to use the metaphor as well. In his writings, Tertullian uses this language frequently. Since he himself was no martyr, he cast himself in the role of a spectator cheering for his favorite. In his

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<sup>136</sup>*Passio Perp.* 10.7-8. Et expoliata sum et facta sum masculus; et coeperunt me favisores mei oleo defricare, quomodo solent in agone. Et illum contra Aegyptium video in afa volutantem. Et exivit vir quidam mirae magnitudinis ut etiam excederet fastigium amphitheatri, discinctatus, purpuram inter duos clauos per medium pectus habens, et galliculas multiformes ex auro et argento factas, et ferens virgam quasi lanista, et ramum viridem in quo erant mala aurea (trans. Musurillo).

<sup>137</sup>*Passio Perp.* 10.14. Et intellexi me non ad bestias, sed contra diabolum esse pugnaturam (trans. Musurillo).

<sup>138</sup>*Passio Perp.* 10.13.

<sup>139</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 277A.2 (PLS 2:418). Athletae suo ita praecipit quid faciat, et proponit quid accipiat, ut etiam ne deficiat subvenit (trans. Hill).

*Ad Martyras*, Tertullian compares his exhortations to the encouragement the crowd gives a performer.

Not that I am specially entitled to exhort you, yet not only the trainers and overseers, but even the unskilled, nay, all who choose, without the slightest need for it, are wont to animate from afar by their cries the most accomplished gladiators, and from the mere throng of onlookers useful suggestions have sometimes come.<sup>140</sup>

These cries of exhortation were meant to spur the martyrs on towards greater “manliness” in the face of their trials.

The martyrs earned their crowns with virtues that Roman society viewed as masculine. Endurance, strength, activity, agency, these traits belonged to the athlete. These traits gave victory to a competitor. Though these traits were masculine, not all martyrs were men. Perpetua “became” a man. Likewise, Tertullian believed that women martyrs had to act like men.<sup>141</sup> Augustine, however, taught that these masculine virtues were located not in the martyrs, whether they be male or female, but the virtues were possessions of Christ.

### **Christ in the Athlete**

Augustine admires the passivity and feminine qualities of the martyrs. Though some of his language may be merely rhetorical overstatement befitting the occasion, when preaching on Perpetua and Felicity’s feast day, Augustine indicates that these women epitomized the martyr spirit. He preaches, “For what is more glorious than these women, whom men more easily admire than imitate?”<sup>142</sup> At another time he calls their martyrdoms a “greater miracle”

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<sup>140</sup>Tert. *Ad Martyras* 1.2. Nec tantus ego sum, ut vos alloquar; verumtamen et gladiatores perfectissimos non tantum magistri et praepositi sui, sed etiam idiotae et supervacui quique adhortantur de longinquo, ut saepe de ipso populo dictata suggesta profuerint (trans. ANF).

<sup>141</sup>Tert. *Ad Martyras* 4.

<sup>142</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 280.1 (PL 38:1281). Quid enim gloriosius his feminis, quas viri mirantur facilius, quam imitantur?

than those of the men who died with them.<sup>143</sup> Moreover, Augustine does not gloss over the frailty of the women or congratulate them on playing the man (even though, as noted above, Perpetua herself emphasizes this aspect). In fact, he savors their feminine weakness, even as he exalts them as the preeminent martyrs. Augustine dwells on the tears that Perpetua shed when her father was beaten because of her adherence to Christianity. He tells his congregation, “In fact that pain in no way undermined the strength of her resolve, and also added to the renown of her sufferings.”<sup>144</sup> Augustine believed that Perpetua’s frailty was her greatest strength. In the same sermon, Augustine says, “For there is a more glorious crown for the weaker sex, because clearly a manly spirit has done more in women.”<sup>145</sup> This “manly spirit” is not something that the martyrs work up on their own. Augustine speaks of the spirit of Christ working through the martyrs.

According to Augustine, the true martyrs did not work their marvelous feats of endurance by their own fortitude, but rather, Christ worked in them to produce the patience necessary for martyrdom. In a sermon on the Scillitan Saints probably preached in Carthage early in his career, Augustine says, “The strength of Christ’s martyrs, both men and women, is Christ.”<sup>146</sup> Indeed, Augustine supposed martyrdom should not be attempted apart from this indwelling of Christ’s strength. In 250, Castus and Aemilius failed during their first encounter with martyrdom and burned the incense. At a later date, however, they remained faithful and

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<sup>143</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 282.3 (PL 38:1286). miraculo maiore

<sup>144</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 281.2 (PL 38:1284). Proinde et dolor ille nihil retraxit robori fortitudinis, et aliquid addidit laudibus passionis (trans. Hill).

<sup>145</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 281.1 (PL 38:1284). Nam ibi est corona gloriosior, ubi sexus infirmior. Quia profecto virilis animus in feminas maius aliquid fecit.

<sup>146</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 299E.1 (PLS 2:625). Martyrum Christi virorum et feminarum fortitudo Christus.

were martyred.<sup>147</sup> Preaching on their feast day in 397, Augustine says, “Perhaps they too, to begin with, relied presumptuously on their own powers, and that’s why they fell away. He showed them who they really were, in themselves, and who he really was.”<sup>148</sup> The power and strength for martyrdom dwell within the martyrs but originate outside them.

This strength is best viewed through the martyr’s personal weakness. The weaker the martyr, the greater the martyrdom. Embracing this weakness was in itself an imitation of Christ. Augustine taught his people, “The one who had made himself weak for them was shown to be undefeated in them.”<sup>149</sup> While Tertullian encouraged women to act like men, Augustine encouraged his hearers to embrace the qualities that society thought of as feminine. Passivity and frailty belonged to the martyr; activity and strength belonged to Christ. The martyr could be perfected only by witnessing to the manly virtues of Christ.<sup>150</sup>

This shift in thinking relates back to Augustine’s concern that Christians view martyrdom in light of New Testament witness bearing. Exalting the weakness or passivity of the martyrs also bears directly on the questions surrounding voluntary martyrdom, which were examined in the previous chapter. When Augustine claims that the active element in martyrdom

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<sup>147</sup>Cyprian *De lapsis* 13.

<sup>148</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 285.4 (PL 38:1295). Fortasse et ipsi de suis viribus antea praesumpserunt, et ideo defecerunt. Ostendit eis qui essent ipsi, qui ipse (trans. Hill).

<sup>149</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 281.1 (PL 38:1284). Ille in eis apparuit invictus, qui pro eis factus est infirmus (trans. Hill).

<sup>150</sup>Brent Shaw provides an alternative explanation for Augustine’s reinterpretation of Perpetua’s passion in Brent Shaw, “The Passion of Perpetua,” *Past and Present* 139 (1993): 3-45. Shaw believes that Augustine reinforces traditional patriarchal gender roles in his preaching because of the threatening feminism in Perpetua’s passion. Shaw misreads Augustine’s intent, which I contend is much more subversive in that he advocates the “feminine” virtues for all Christians. Shaw’s analysis goes awry on two counts. (1) Shaw totally neglects Augustine’s emphasis that Christ’s masculinity, not their own, empowers the martyrs. (2) Shaw bases his argument on some dubious translation, rendering *hominis* as “man” in the masculine sense.

is the spirit of Christ, he is emphasizing that martyrdom first and foremost is about the witness bearing. The martyrs were the athletes of the Church, but Augustine shifts the attention from the martyr-athlete to the Christ-athlete in the martyr. This shift takes attention off the sufferings of the martyr in the holy spectacle and highlights the message of Christ behind the sufferings. Augustine gave his persecution-free congregation a more spiritual form of imitation, and his new emphasis allowed him to question the sufferings that his Donatist neighbors experienced in the name of Christ.

### **Cause versus Punishment in Martyrdom**

In his sermons, Augustine exalted the martyrs' cause over the martyrs' sufferings in order to define the boundaries of martyrdom for his flock. He says, "Let us love in them, not their sufferings, but the causes of their suffering. For if we loved only their sufferings, we are going to find many who suffered worse things in bad causes."<sup>151</sup> When preaching on the martyrs and martyrdom, Augustine frequently cites Psalm 43:1, in which the persecuted psalmist asks God to "distinguish my cause." After citing this passage Augustine often says, "The punishment does not make the martyr, but the cause does."<sup>152</sup> Augustine freely admits that Donatists suffered, but their suffering was not martyrdom because their cause was outside the Catholic church. He illustrates this point by reminding his hearers that Jesus was crucified between two criminals. Though all three men received the same punishment, only Jesus' suffering had a just cause; the other two men suffered for their own iniquity.<sup>153</sup> In another sermon, Augustine

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<sup>151</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 335.2 (PL 38:1471). Amemus in eis, non passiones, sed causas passionum. Nam si amaverimus passiones tantum, multos inventuri sumus qui peiora patiuntur in causis malis.

<sup>152</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 327.1 (PL 38:1451). Non facit martyrem poena, sed causa. Cf. *Sermons* 274, 283, 285, 325, 335, 335G, and 359B.

<sup>153</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 327.2. N.B. Jesus as proto-martyr.

provocatively asserts that if suffering makes the martyr, then even the Devil could claim the name.

If suffering is what is to be boasted about, then the devil himself can also do some boasting. Notice how much he is suffering, with his temples everywhere being pulled down, his idols everywhere being smashed, his priests and soothsayers everywhere being beaten. Can he say, do you suppose, “I too am a martyr, because I am enduring such great sufferings”?<sup>154</sup>

As in the case of the Devil, Donatists did not suffer unjustly, but reaped the consequences of their choices.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Augustine viewed patience as the hallmark of martyrdom. It prevented Christians from engaging in voluntary martyrdom. Christ gave this patience to his church. Many Donatist martyrs did not engage in voluntary martyrdom but suffered at the hands of Catholic magistrates. Nonetheless, Augustine teaches that they did not exhibit patience. Instead, they succumbed to patience’s shadow vice, stubbornness. Augustine says, “Endurance in the form of a vice is stubbornness. For Stubbornness imitates patience, but it is not patience.”<sup>155</sup> Augustine compares the Donatist martyrs to a criminal who receives his punishment with defiance instead of repentance. He tells this congregation, “He is prepared to be tortured for Donatus. Neither does he conceal this with a denial, but he confesses, nor is he ashamed, he boasts of his iniquity.”<sup>156</sup> According to Augustine, Donatist martyrs did not receive

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<sup>154</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 328.4 (PL 38:1453). Si de passione gloriandum est; potest et ipse diabolus gloriari. Videte quanta patitur, cuius ubique templa evertuntur, cuius ubique idola franguntur, cuius ubique sacerdotes et arreptitii caeduntur. Numquid potest dicere: Et ego martyr sum, quia tanta patior! (trans. Hill).

<sup>155</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 283.7 (Dolbeau 15). Tolerantia in vitio duritia. Duritia enim imitatur patientiam, sed non est patientia.

<sup>156</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 283.7 (Dolbeau 15). Pro Donato torqueri paratus est, neque hoc negando tegit, sed confitetur, nec erubescit: iactat se de iniquitate.

a martyr's crown; instead, they only compounded their guilt by holding to their schism in the face of persecution.

The Donatist movement was one of separation, not just from the Catholics, but also from society as a whole. Donatists felt that their identity was constantly being threatened by persecution and compromise and that as a group they existed to maintain and defend an alternative to Roman North African society.<sup>157</sup> Donatists wrote their martyr tales to provide foundations for supporting this alternative to society.

The *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs* tells the Donatist version of the North African schism's antecedents. Augustine's criticism that Donatist martyrs died for a different cause seems applicable in this case. The martyrs in this text exhort their hearers to schism.

But already near to the Lord by their merits and their confession, they [the martyrs] directed those who succeeded them, the renewed progeny of the Christian name [those who would become Donatists], to be separated from all filth and communion with traitors by this warning: "If anyone communicates with the traitors, that person will have no part with us in the heavenly kingdom."<sup>158</sup>

Maureen Tilley rightly notes, "In this martyr story the biblical message is not the comforting theme of unity and peace but the strident call for condemnation and division. Not reconciliation but separation and excommunication is the cry of these martyrs."<sup>159</sup> The Donatist church quickly came to view itself as a new Israel, separated from the godless nations, separated from both the Catholics and the pagans residing both inside and outside North Africa. They rooted this conception of themselves in the tales of the martyrs who died preserving the scriptures, like the

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<sup>157</sup>Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 209.

<sup>158</sup>*Acta Saturnini* 18. Sed meritis iam Domino et confessione vicini direxerunt in posteros salutem, quae communem christiani nominis progeniem ab omni recidiva communione traditorum secerneret, tali sub comminatione: *Si quis traditoribus communicaverit, nobiscum partem in regnis caelestibus non habebit* (trans. Tilley).

<sup>159</sup>Tilley, "Scripture as an Element of Social Control," 395.

Maccabees who died for the Law.<sup>160</sup> Augustine seeks to undermine this image of the divisive martyr with his sermons.

True martyrdom required union with the Church. The Church belonged to God, not the bishops, and it could not be divided. Claiming that the Donatists stole part of God's flock and fed "their own sheep," Augustine says, "Peter's merit, because he fed God's sheep, would never have been crowned with true martyrdom, if he had fed his own sheep."<sup>161</sup> For a martyrdom to be true martyrdom, it had to take place in God's Church, not Donatus's.

And so let us honor the martyrs inside, in the tabernacle of the shepherd, in the members of the shepherd, ones marked by grace, not audacity; by piety, not temerity; as steadfast, not obstinate; as gathering together, not dividing and scattering. In a word, if you wish to imitate true martyrs, choose yourselves a cause, so that you can say to the Lord, *Judge me, O Lord, and distinguish my cause from an unholy nation* (Ps 43:1). Distinguish, not my pain and punishment, because an unholy nation has that too; but my cause, which only a holy nation has. So choose yourselves a cause, hold onto a good and just cause, and with the Lord's help have no fear of any pain or punishment.<sup>162</sup>

The Donatists, however, viewed the Catholics' version of unity as a specious one.

The Donatists believed that they possessed a unity of the pure and that Catholic calls for unity were ploys of Satan to destroy the true church, the Donatist church. In a Donatist sermon given between 317-321, the preacher, perhaps Donatus himself, says:

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<sup>160</sup>Tilley, "Sustaining Donatist Self-Identity: from the Church of the Martyrs to the *Collecta* of the Desert." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 5 (1997): 29.

<sup>161</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 299A.2 (Dolbeau 4). Meritum Petri, quod pavit oves dei, numquam esset vero martyrio coronatum, si oves suas pavisset. Augustine seemed to be particularly fond of this image of the Donatists as stolen sheep. Cf. *Sermon* 295.5.

<sup>162</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 285.7 (PL 38:1297). Martyres itaque intus honoremus in tabernaculo pastoris, in membris pastoris, habentes gratiam, non audaciam; pietatem, non temeritatem; constantiam, non pertinaciam; collectionem, non divisionem. Proinde si vultis martyres veros imitari, causam vobis eligite, ut dicatis Domino: *Iudica me, Domine, et discerne causam meam a gente non sancta* (Psal. XLII, 1). Discerne, non poenam meam; nam habet hanc et gens non sancta; sed causam meam, quam non habet nisi gens sancta. Causam ergo vobis eligite, causam bonam et iustam tenete, et in adiutorio Domini nullam poenam timete (trans. Hill).

Nevertheless, this rapacious robber was frustrated that he did not control everyone by this ruse. So the enemy of salvation concocted a more subtle conceit to violate the purity of faith. “Christ,” he said, “is the lover of unity. Therefore, let there be unity.” Those people who were already fawning on him and were deserted by God came to be called “Catholics.” By prejudice in favor of the name, those who refused to communicate with them were called “heretics.”<sup>163</sup>

Later he goes on to say, “Therefore, the one who corrupts holy discipline could violate the chastity of faith under the by-word of unity, i.e., by compelling unity with himself, not with God.”<sup>164</sup> Augustine claimed that Christians did not have unity with God apart from the Catholic communion; the Donatists claimed that Christians could not have unity with God in the Catholic communion.

In order to support his own position, Augustine grounded his version of unity in the universal nature of Catholicism, a universality that posed problems for Donatists who were suspicious of the churches outside North Africa. Augustine viewed the church as a people on the offensive, a people who would change the society that was its antithesis. Peter Brown writes, “The Catholicism of Augustine ... reflects the attitude of a group confident in its power to absorb the world without losing its identity.”<sup>165</sup> In a sermon commemorating the martyrdoms of Peter and Paul, Augustine cites Psalm 19:4, in which the knowledge of God goes out to all the earth. He claims that God spreads this knowledge through these apostles’ martyrdoms, but Augustine does not pass up an opportunity to attack the schismatics. “I imagine that they too are

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<sup>163</sup>*Sermo de Passione Advocati et Donati* 3 (PL 8:754). Tamen insatiabilis praedo moleste ferens quod non omnes hac arte possederit, subtilius argumentum ad violandum fidei sinceritatem invenit salutis inimicus. Christus, inquit, amator unitatis est, unitas igitur fiat: ante plebem nimis sibi semper obsecutam, ideoque a Deo desertam, Catholicam vocans ut de praeiudicio nominis, qui communicare noluerunt, haeretici dicerentur (trans. Tilley).

<sup>164</sup>*Passio Donati* 5. Poterat igitur disciplinae salutaris eversor castitatem fidei unitatis vocabulo violare, id est, unitatem ipsam sibi non Deo cogere (trans. Tilley).

<sup>165</sup>Brown, *Augustine*, 209. Also see 220-21.

celebrating the birthday of the apostles today; they pretend, indeed, to celebrate this day, but they certainly daren't sing this psalm."<sup>166</sup> Augustine believed that Donatists could not sing this psalm because some Donatists bishops taught that the church was only found in North Africa.

Augustine viewed the universal aspect of the church as foundational, and this universality entailed unity. If a martyr was outside Catholicism then he was not a martyr at all. In another sermon, Augustine cites Luke 24:46, which is another passage that implies the universality of the gospel, and then adds, "This is the Church you must acknowledge if you are a martyr, the Church expressly named by Christ's own lips, foretold by the prophets, his heralds, this the one you must hold onto; shed your blood in this Church and for this Church."<sup>167</sup> No matter how dramatic the spectacle, and the Donatists capitalized on drama, attempts at martyrdom outside the communion of the Catholic church earned no crowns.

### **Conclusion**

The spectacle and sufferings of martyrdom elicited emotional responses from North African Christians. Augustine affirmed this emotive tradition, but he cautioned his people that they needed to pay more attention to the cause of martyrdom than the spectacular feats that accompanied it. Donatists had something that looked similar to martyrdom, but it was a perverse shadow of what the Catholics possessed. The martyrs taught unity, not divisiveness. Augustine ends one of his sermons on Perpetua, "At least we are all in attendance upon the same Lord, all

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<sup>166</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 299A.9 (Dolbeau 4). Puto quia et ipsi hodie celebrant natalem apostolorum; adfectant quidem istum diem celebrare, sed non audent istum psalmum cantare (trans. Hill).

<sup>167</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 359B.19 (Dolbeau 2). Hanc ecclesiam ore Christi expressam, prophetarum praeconio praenuntiatam, hanc agnosce, si martyr es, hanc tene; in hac et pro hac sanguinem funde (trans. Hill).

following the same teacher, accompanying the same leader, joined to the same head, tending our way to the same Jerusalem, pursuing the same charity, and embracing the same unity.”<sup>168</sup>

Here Augustine makes no statement of therapeutic reconciliation. This statement is one of solidarity. When Augustine says “we all,” he refers not merely to the listening congregation; rather, he includes Perpetua and Felicity as well. The martyrs stand with Augustine and his flock, condemning the Donatists and their schism.

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<sup>168</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 280.6 (PL 38:1283-84). Omnes tamen eidem Domino paremus, eundem magistrum sequimur, eundem principem comitamur, eidem capiti subiungimur, ad eandem Ierusalem tendimus, eandem sectamur charitatem, eandemque amplectimur unitatem (trans. Hill).

## CHAPTER 5

### VENERATING THE MARTYRS IN AUGUSTINE'S NORTH AFRICA

Augustine's program of redefining the experience of martyrdom had repercussions on how North African Catholics related to the martyrs. His emphasis on the martyrs as testifiers to eternal truth meant that Augustine expected his flock to celebrate the feast days in a sober manner. Venerating the martyrs was acceptable, but primarily the martyrs were worthy of imitation. He warned against viewing the martyrs as mediators and sought to draw them near to his flock by supposing that they were part of the same congregation. At every point, Augustine must redefine the traditions of his communion, distinguishing it from the neighboring Donatists.

#### **Honoring the Martyrs through Celebration**

The North African churches, Catholic and Donatist alike, observed the martyrs' feast days with exuberance. Christians celebrated the victorious martyrs with feasting, drinking, and dancing, and the festivities often continued late into the night. These celebrations would often take place at the graves of the martyrs, but often other locations sufficed for the memorial. Carthage had two shrines for Cyprian, one for his grave and one for the place of his execution. North Africans preferred their homegrown saints, such as Cyprian and Perpetua, who even received more attention than the martyred apostles did.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>169</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 298.1.1.

In Milan, Augustine's mother Monica discovered that not all churches practiced these customs. Augustine wrote that she "brought to certain oratories, erected in the memory of the saints, offerings of porridge, bread, and wine—as had been her custom in Africa—and she was forbidden to do so by the doorkeeper."<sup>170</sup> Augustine described his mother as a very temperate woman who only drank one cup of diluted wine, no matter how many saints she needed to honor. Even so the bishop Ambrose convinced her to abandon her native customs. Augustine relates that Ambrose had two reasons for forbidding the practice: "it might be an occasion of gluttony for those who were already drunken and also because these funereal memorials were very much like some of the superstitious practices of the pagans."<sup>171</sup> Augustine took the example of Ambrose to heart, and upon his return to North Africa, he worked with other Catholic bishops to change the perception of the people regarding the purpose of the feast day.

Augustine filled his sermons on the martyrs with denunciations of what he saw as excesses in the popular celebrations. In a sermon delivered in 401 in Carthage, Augustine compares those people who attend the martyr feasts for the purpose of drinking wine to their forebears who persecuted the martyrs.<sup>172</sup> Augustine frequently condemns the drunkenness that attended feast days, and the Catholic bishops attempted to curtail some of the revelry that accompanied these holy days.

Augustine preached to a somewhat rowdy crowd in Carthage on January 23, 404, the

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<sup>170</sup>Aug. *Conf.* 6.2. Itaque cum ad memorias sanctorum, sicut in Africa solebat, pultes et panem et merum attulisset atque ab ostiario prohiberetur (trans. NPNF<sup>1</sup>).

<sup>171</sup>Aug. *Conf.* 6.2. Ista non fieri nec ab eis qui sobrie facerent, ne ulla occasio se ingurgitandi daretur ebriosis, et quia illa quasi parentalia superstitioni gentilium essent simillima (trans. NPNF<sup>1</sup>).

<sup>172</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 305A.4.

day after he sulkily refused to preach because of too much disturbance.<sup>173</sup> In this sermon, he lauds the reforms that Aurelius the bishop of Carthage had instituted concerning the celebration of feast days. Augustine tells those gathered, “We all know what a harmful mixing between males and females took place here, because we also were part of that stain in previous days.”<sup>174</sup> Since the days of Augustine’s youth, Aurelius had instituted a segregation of the sexes in order to minimize opportunity for immoral behavior. Augustine sees this step as positive because he knows that not everyone who attended a saint’s feast was primarily interested in contemplating their victory over Satan. He confesses to his audience, “When I went to vigils as a student in this city, I spent the night rubbing up beside women, along with other boys anxious to make an impression on the girls, and where, who knows, the opportunity might present itself to have a love-affair with them.”<sup>175</sup> He encourages these Carthaginian Christians to keep up the good work by exclaiming, “Now how respectably vigils are kept, how chaste, how holy!”<sup>176</sup> He claims that Aurelius’s reforms are so obviously beneficial that even those who wish to engage in dubious activities at the feasts of the martyrs will not be able to complain against them.<sup>177</sup>

Instead of providing a day of worldly pleasure, a feast day should encourage North African Christians to imitate the martyrs’ virtues. At the feast of some unidentified martyr, Augustine exhorted his congregation to have self-control. He tells them, “So this is what it

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<sup>173</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 359B.3.

<sup>174</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 359B.5 (Dolbeau 2). Quae hic enim antea fuerit dissolutio et confusio feminarum et masculorum, omnes novimus, quia et nos in praeterita aetate huius labis pars fuimus.

<sup>175</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 359B.5 (Dolbeau 2). Ego puer vigilans cum studerem in hac civitate, sic vigilavi feminis permixtis improbitatibus masculorum, ubi forte et castitatem temptabat occasio (trans. Brown, *Augustine*, 456-457).

<sup>176</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 359B.5 (Dolbeau 2). Quam nunc honeste vigilatur, quam caste, quam sancte!

<sup>177</sup>Augustine seems here to be telling his hearers how beneficial the reforms are precisely because many people were complaining about them.

means to love the martyrs, this is what celebrating the feast day of the martyrs with devotion and piety really means—not drowning yourself in wine, but imitating their faith and endurance.”<sup>178</sup> Though Augustine accuses the Circumcellions of the greatest excesses,<sup>179</sup> he acknowledges that both Donatists and Catholics overindulged in the festive aspect of honoring the martyrs. Augustine attempted, therefore, to convince North African Christians to honor the martyrs through imitation.

### **Honoring the Martyrs through Imitation**

The Donatists and Catholics in North Africa viewed their relationships with the martyrs differently. Donatist martyr texts were written to provide a link to their past. The author of the *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs* writes, “These [records] were inscribed in the indispensable archives of memory lest both the glory of the martyrs and the condemnation of the traitors fade with the passing of the ages.”<sup>180</sup> When considering how to imitate the martyrs, the most obvious way that comes to mind is to suffer and perhaps even die at the hands of persecutors. Though little evidence survives from the Donatists themselves, this call to imitate their martyrs’ sufferings was still relevant since they were still experiencing sporadic and varying levels of persecution from the Catholics. A Donatist sermon from the first years of repression gives the clear message that the faithful need to prepare themselves to resist the persecutions of their false brothers.<sup>181</sup> The Donatist congregations could also follow the martyrs’ example by maintaining

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<sup>178</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 328.8 (PLS 2:801). Hoc est ergo martyres amare, hoc est dies martyrum devota pietate celebrare, non vino ingurgitari sed illorum fidem et patientiam imitari (trans. Hill).

<sup>179</sup>See Frend, *Donatist Church*, 174-175 for his description of their “holy drunkenness.”

<sup>180</sup>*Acta Saturnini* 1. [Acta martyrum] necessario in archivo memoriae conscripta sunt, ne saeculis transeuntibus obsolesceret gloria martyrum et damnatio traditorum (trans. Tilley).

<sup>181</sup>*Passio Donati* 14.

their distance from the Catholics. The author of the *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs* instructed his readers to “flee and curse the whole corrupt congregation of all the polluted people and all must seek the glorious lineage of the blessed martyrs, which is the one, holy and true Church, from which the martyrs arise and whose divine mysteries the martyrs observe.”<sup>182</sup>

Donatist Christians continued to heed these admonitions during Augustine’s time. In 420, the tribune ordered Gaudentius, the Donatist bishop of Thamugadi, to surrender his cathedral to the Catholics. Gaudentius refused, and his congregation rallied to his cause. He promised an extreme reaction if the authorities resorted to force. He threatened to burn the cathedral down with himself and the congregation inside.<sup>183</sup> The result of the situation is unknown, but clearly the Donatists were willing to die in order to preserve their separation.

While the Donatists could imitate the martyrs in action, the Catholics, whose persecution had ended a century earlier, did not have the same opportunity. Even so, Augustine attempts to preserve that element of imitation by exhorting his listeners to imitate the spiritual qualities of the martyrs. After all, since the cause of martyrdom outshone the sufferings of martyrdom, spiritual imitation trumped physical imitation. In one of his sermons on Perpetua and Felicity, Augustine preaches, “If we are not capable of following them in action, let us follow in affection; if not in glory, then certainly in joy and gladness; if not in merit, then in desire; if not in suffering, then in fellow feeling; if not in excellence, then in our close

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<sup>182</sup>*Acta Saturnini* 20. Fugienda est ergo et execranda pollutorum omnium congregatio vitiosa, et appetenda omnibus beatissimorum martyrum successio gloriosa, quae est Ecclesia sancta, una et vera catholica, ex qua martyres profecti sunt, et a quibus divina testamenta servata sunt (trans. Tilley). N.B. Tilley believes that the best reading is *mysteria* referring to sacraments, rather than *testamenta*, which is found in PL (Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, 48).

<sup>183</sup>Aug. *Contra Gaud.* 1. See Fend, *Donatist Church*, 296.

relationship with them.”<sup>184</sup> According to Augustine, the martyrs related to Christians as examples for imitating Christ.

All Christians were meant to follow that narrow way leading to salvation. In a sermon on Peter and Paul, Augustine encourages his congregation, telling them that they do not walk that narrow path by themselves. He claims that even though it is a “thorny” (*spinosa*) and “difficult” (*dura*) path, it has become “smooth” (*lenis*) because so many faithful have gone before. He preaches, “The Lord himself went along it first, the apostles went along it fearlessly; after them the martyrs, boys, women, girls.”<sup>185</sup> When Christians imitated the martyrs, they actually imitated Christ. In a sermon preached in 408, Augustine claims that churches celebrate the feast days in order to promote this imitation. He explains, “So this is why these feasts have been instituted in the Church of Christ; it’s so that by them the congregation of Christ’s members may be admonished to imitate Christ’s martyrs. That’s absolutely the only value of this festivity, there isn’t any other at all.”<sup>186</sup> While promoting what Augustine sees as the true value of the martyrs’ relationship to the congregation, this statement simultaneously reminds Augustine’s hearers of his disapproval of the revelry that so often attended these feasts. Augustine continues, saying that God gave the church the martyrs’ example to preclude human frailty from inventing excuses as to why it could not imitate Christ: “So therefore, it was to deny our weakness and our lack of faith all such excuses that the martyrs built for us a paved road. It was to be built of

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<sup>184</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 280.6 (PL 38:1283). Si eos sequi non valemus actu, sequamur affectu: si non gloria, certe laetitia: si non meritis, votis: si non passione, compassione: si non excellentia, connexione (trans. Hill).

<sup>185</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 295.8 (PL 38:1352). Transiit ipse prior Dominus, transierunt Apostoli intrepidi, postea martyres, pueri, mulieres, puellae (trans. Hill).

<sup>186</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 325.1 (PL 38:1447). Ad hoc ergo istae festivitates in Ecclesia constitutae sunt Christi, ut per eas congregatio membrorum Christi admoneatur imitari martyres Christi. Haec est omnino huius festivitatis utilitas, alia non est (trans. Hill).

paving stones, on which we could walk without a qualm.”<sup>187</sup> He says, “If you’re reluctant to imitate the Lord, imitate your fellow servant.”<sup>188</sup>

Not only did Augustine use the martyrs as examples for the Christian life, but also he used the Donatist martyrs as counterexamples. In a sermon preached in Carthage on Cyprian’s feast day in 405, Augustine states, “To celebrate in honor of a martyr is easy; to imitate the martyr’s faith and patience is great.”<sup>189</sup> Cyprian was the hero of all North African Christians, Catholics and Donatists alike. In this sermon Augustine makes a dig against the schismatics. He claims that Cyprian’s faith and patience allowed him to overcome the “errors and terrors” of his day. In a clear allusion to the Donatists, Augustine warns, “In this age, errors and terrors abound.”<sup>190</sup> Catholics needed protection from the errors of schism and the terrors of the Circumcellions. Following Cyprian meant avoiding those who claimed him as founder.

Along with this patience, Augustine viewed *caritas*, a giving love, as the fundamental virtue of the martyrs, and by extolling the martyrs’ *caritas*, he wished to help his flock avoid *caritas*’s opposite quality, pride. He accuses the Donatists of being prideful. He says, “Therefore, the spirit of God is a spirit of love [*caritas*], the spirit of this world a spirit of exaltation. Those who have the spirit of this world are proud and ungrateful to God.”<sup>191</sup> In this

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<sup>187</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 325.1 (PL 38:1448). Ad tollendas igitur omnes excusationes infidelis infirmitatis, martyres nobis stratam construxerunt. Lapideis enim tabulis construenda erat, qui securi ambularemus (trans. Hill). Hill notes, “It was to be, in fact, a good Roman road” (Hill, *Sermons*, vol. 9, 325 n.2).

<sup>188</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 325.1 (PL 38:1448). Si piget imitari Dominum, imitare conservum (trans. Hill).

<sup>189</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 311.1 (PL 38:1414). Facile est honorem martyris celebrari: magnum est fidem atque patientiam martyris imitari.

<sup>190</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 311.1 (PL 38:1414). Abundant in isto saeculo errores et terrores.

<sup>191</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 283.8 (Dolbeau 15). Ergo spiritus dei spiritus est caritatis; spiritus huius mundi spiritus est elationis. Qui habent spiritum huius mundi, superbi sunt, ingrati sunt deo.

passage, Augustine refers to the Donatist martyrs when he says “those who have the spirit of this world.” *Caritas* is the foundational characteristic of the Christian, and *caritas* is exactly what Augustine accused the Donatists of lacking. In another sermon on Cyprian, which Augustine may have preached during one of the more tense periods between the factions, he claims the Donatist martyrs were proud, and thus not Christian martyrs. He even speculates that their pride drove the cliff-jumpers to suicide in order to found martyr cults for themselves.<sup>192</sup> Since the Donatist church lacked *caritas*, it merely paid lip service to the true martyrs. Augustine claims that the Donatists abandoned their spiritual founder Cyprian because the Christian qualities that Cyprian possessed were found with the Catholics, not the Donatists. In preaching on the martyrs, Augustine encouraged his flock towards love, patience, and other virtues of the martyrs, while simultaneously reiterating the divide between the Catholics and the Donatists.

### **Martyrs, Miracles, and Mediation**

In spite of Augustine’s teaching that God gave the martyrs for imitative purposes, many North African Catholics must have persisted in some level of confusion regarding their relationship to the martyrs. Was celebrating a martyr’s feast day a form of worship? How should North African Christians understand their relationship with the martyrs in light of the miracles attributed to them? Did the martyrs function as mediators between God and his people?

In his sermons, Augustine went to great pains to explain that Christians do not worship the martyrs on their feast days. In 396, early in his preaching career, Augustine explains to those gathered:

We don’t provide [the martyrs] with temples, with altars, with sacrifices. Priests don’t make offerings to them; perish the thought! These things are provided for God; or rather these things are offered to God, by whom all things are provided for us. Even when we make the offering at the shrines of the holy martyrs, don’t we offer it to God? The holy

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<sup>192</sup> Aug. *Serm.* 313E.5.

martyrs have their place of honor. Notice, please; in the recitation of names at the altar of Christ, their names are recited in the most honored place; but for all that, they are not worshiped instead of Christ.<sup>193</sup>

When Augustine speaks of making “the offering at the shrines of the holy martyrs,” he probably means the Eucharist. Augustine tries to correct any misunderstanding of either his congregation or those watching from the outside that Christians worship the martyrs. He explicitly names Christ as the object of worship because the location of the congregation’s worship, the martyrs’ shrines, could lead to confusion.

In the same sermon, Augustine cites the fourteenth chapter of Acts, in which the residents of Lystra confuse Paul and Barnabas with Hermes and Zeus. He notes that at the time they were horrified at being worshiped, and he claims that even after their deaths they would still be horrified if worshiped.<sup>194</sup> He uses the opportunity to preach restraint in celebration to his listeners.

The martyrs hate your flagons, the martyrs hate your roasting pans, the martyrs hate your drunken revels. I am saying this without wishing to insult those who are not that sort; those who do such things can apply what I’m saying to themselves. The martyrs hate these things, they don’t love those who go in for them. But they hate it much more if they are themselves worshiped.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>193</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 273.7 (PL 38:1251). Non eis templa, non eis altaria, non sacrificia exhibemus. Non eis sacerdotes offerunt: absit. Deo praestantur. Imo Deo ista offeruntur, a quo nobis cuncta praestantur. Etiam apud memorias sanctorum martyrum cum offerimus, nonne Deo offerimus? Habent honorabilem locum martyres sancti. Advertite: in recitatione ad altare Christi loco meliore recitantur; non tamen pro Christo adorantur (trans. Hill).

<sup>194</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 273.8.

<sup>195</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 273.8 (PL 38:1251-52). Oderunt martyres lagenas vestras, oderunt martyres sartagine vestras, oderunt martyres ebrietates vestras. Sine iniuria eorum dico, qui tales non sunt: illi ad se referant, qui talia faciunt: oderunt ista martyres, non amant talia facientes. Sed multo plus oderunt, si colantur (trans. Hill).

No doubt, Augustine believed that if he could change North Africa's traditional celebrations, then much of the confusion surrounding whether the martyrs were worshiped or not would be alleviated.

The miracles attributed to the martyrs complicated the question of their relationship to the congregation. Some scholars have noticed a development in Augustine's acceptance of the miraculous. Many people note his lukewarm reception of miracles early in his career and his emphatic publishing of them later.<sup>196</sup> Though his enthusiasm for the miraculous seems to have increased after the establishment of the cult of Stephen in North Africa, Augustine never denied the possibility of miracles done at the martyrs' shrines. In a sermon on Lawrence's feast day in 400, Augustine tells this people:

Is there anyone who doesn't know about the powerful merits of this particular martyr? Did anybody ever pray there, and not obtain the favor asked for? To how many of the weaker brethren have his merits granted even the temporal benefits which he himself scorned! They were conceded, you see, not so that those who prayed for them might remain in their weakness, but so that by being granted inferior benefits, their love might be stimulated to seek the better ones.<sup>197</sup>

He emphasizes in this sermon that any miracles granted to the people should lead to their imitation of the higher virtues of the martyrs. Needless to say, Augustine denied the existence of miracles among the Donatists and claimed that their supposed miracles caused them to worship their martyrs.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>196</sup>See Lancel, *St. Augustine*, 320; Brown, *Augustine*, 419.

<sup>197</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 302.1 (PL 38:1385). Cuius autem meriti sit memoratus Martyr, quis ignorat? Quis ibi oravit, et non impetravit? Quam multis infirmis meritum eius etiam temporalia beneficia praestitit, quae ille contempsit. Concessa sunt enim, non ut precantium permaneret infirmitas; sed ut deterioribus concessis, amor fieret ad appetenda melior (trans. Hill).

<sup>198</sup>See Brown, *Augustine*, 417.

In Augustine's last days, however, Hippo became awash in the miraculous. In 416, Orosius brought some recently discovered relics of Stephen to North Africa. Many shrines to Stephen were established throughout the countryside, and eventually, in 425, the cult arrived in Hippo. At this point, Augustine became an enthusiast for the miraculous.<sup>199</sup> In *City of God*, Augustine catalogues many of the miracles that he had either witnessed or heard from credible sources. Many of these miracles are healings, but the martyrs were also known to buy a man a new coat.<sup>200</sup>

Even though material benefits derived from a close association with the martyrs, Augustine, even in his most enthusiastic period, maintained that the martyrs' main function remained the same. At their death and in their miracles, the martyrs never stopped bearing witness. Just a couple of years before his death, Augustine preached a sermon at the feast of Protase and Gervase, those martyrs, whose *inventio* by Ambrose helped start the cult of the martyrs in western Christianity.

God never stops bearing witness; and he knows the right way to bring his miracles to our notice. He knows how to act, so that they may be famous; he knows how to act, so that they don't become commonplace. He doesn't grant health to everyone through the martyrs; but to all who imitate the martyrs, he does promise immortality. What he doesn't give to everyone should not be sought by anyone he doesn't give it to; and those he doesn't give it to must take care not to grumble against him, so that he may give them what he does promise at the end. After all, even those people too who are now cured, die sooner or later; those who rise again at the end will live with Christ forever.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>199</sup>See Brown, *Augustine*, 416-419.

<sup>200</sup>Augustine *Civ. Dei* 22.8-9.

<sup>201</sup>Augustine *Sermon* 286.5 (PL 38:1299). Non cessat Deus attestari: et novit quomodo ipsa miracula sua debeat commendare. Novit agere, ut magnificentur: novit agere, ne vilescant. Non omnibus donat per martyres sanitatem: sed omnibus promittit imitatoribus martyrum immortalitatem. Quod non omnibus dat, non quaerat cui non dat: nec murmuret adversus eum quia non dat, ut det quod in fine promisit. Nam et qui modo sanantur, post paululum aliquando moriuntur: qui in fine resurgunt, eum Christo vivent (trans. Hill).

Even though Augustine gives the impression that miracles were happening left and right, obviously not everyone who sought them found their needs fulfilled. Augustine had to repeat that miracles' main purpose was to bear witness to eternal life in Christ.<sup>202</sup>

This focus on the cult of martyrs has led Peter Brown to conclude that during these later years, Augustine was "redefining the nature of the true intermediaries between God and men."<sup>203</sup> Brown believes that for North African Christians the martyrs began to serve as intermediaries.

Unlike the rebel angels, these beings [the martyrs] would link men to God by being equally his servants, and so committed to forwarding his will among men as their fellow servants. The cult of the martyrs, therefore, presented a paradox that enabled Augustine to invert the traditional hierarchy of the universe. Men who had shown themselves, as martyrs, to be true servants of God, could bind their fellow men even closer to God than could the angels. [...] Only the martyrs, heavy with the humility of human death, could bridge that fault.<sup>204</sup>

Brown believes that late antique Christians, including Augustine, viewed the martyrs as playing the role that patrons formerly played.<sup>205</sup>

Perhaps Augustine's congregation dismissed their bishop's teaching and embraced their martyrs as intermediaries, but no evidence exists that Augustine did. To support his thesis, Brown cites *City of God* 8.27 and 10.1, 3, 7, and 20. These passages, however, do not support

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<sup>202</sup>Cf. Augustine *Civ. Dei* 22.9.

<sup>203</sup>Brown, *Cult of Saints*, 60.

<sup>204</sup>Brown, *Cult of Saints*, 60-61.

<sup>205</sup>Brown, *Cult of Saints*, 61; Cf. Brown, *Augustine*, 417, "In the Late Roman towns, men had come to need and to expect the protection of powerful men: S. Stephen settled in Uzalis as the spiritual equivalent of such earthly patrons." Raymond Van Dam poses some helpful critiques of this scheme of Brown's. Van Dam does not believe that Christians neatly assimilated the system of patronage to their relationships with the saints. Rather, Van Dam argues that in many ways the bishop acted as the patron of the dead saint, as well as vice versa. Raymond Van Dam, *Saints and their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 6, 50-81.

his thesis. Augustine explicitly writes in *City of God* that the only intermediary between God and humans is Jesus Christ.<sup>206</sup> Angels are not the go betweens, but neither are the martyrs.

Here again, Augustine breaks with the Christian tradition in North Africa, which viewed the martyrs as mediators in some ways. Tertullian wrote, “Some, not able to find this peace in the Church, have been used to seek it from the imprisoned martyrs.”<sup>207</sup> The Donatists probably continued in this tradition of Tertullian. Indeed their telling of the schism’s foundation emphasizes this issue. The Donatists condemned Mensurius and Caecilian for refusing to allow the faithful to bring gifts to the martyrs in prison.<sup>208</sup>

### **The Relationship of the Martyrs to the Congregation**

Instead of viewing the martyrs as intermediaries, Augustine sought to incorporate them into the Catholic church. Though Peter Brown’s thesis that Augustine viewed the martyrs as patrons is problematic, his idea that Heaven and Earth were joined at the grave of the martyr has merit.<sup>209</sup> In his preaching, Augustine sought to tear down the barriers between the living and the dead, incorporating all Christians into one holy congregation.<sup>210</sup> First, he makes the martyrs more accessible for his hearers. Second, he offered the crown of martyrdom to any faithful member of his congregation.

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<sup>206</sup>Aug. *Civ. dei* 9.15; 10.20.

<sup>207</sup>Tert. *Ad Martyras* 1.6. Quam pacem quidam in ecclesia non habentes a martyribus in carcere exorare consueverunt (trans. ANF).

<sup>208</sup>*Acta Saturnini* 20.

<sup>209</sup>Brown, *Cult of the Saints*, 1-22.

<sup>210</sup>This is consonant with his program in *City of God*, where he envisions the church as a city comprising all saints, living and dead.

First, Augustine dismisses any perceived hierarchy of the martyrs being above the members of the congregation. He preaches, “It isn’t, after all, the case that you are human beings and they weren’t; not, after all, the case that you were born, and they were born quite differently; I mean, they didn’t carry around flesh of a different kind from what you do. We are all from Adam, we are all trying to be in Christ.”<sup>211</sup> Augustine tells his flock that they share the same fallen condition as the martyrs and they share the same goal of attaining Christ. He implies that what the martyrs accomplished they could do too.

Augustine did believe that the martyrs were advocates with God for Christians. He taught that they prayed for the Christians still living.<sup>212</sup> Indeed, Augustine committed himself to their prayers: “May the prayers of the martyrs assist me, as I set out to speak about the glory of the martyrs, and to state briefly the just cause of their martyrdom.”<sup>213</sup> Their prayers for Christians, however, did not place them above the congregation; it placed them within it. Preaching before bishops and laity in Carthage, Augustine claims that while the bishops pray for their people, the bishops also need prayers from the laity on their behalf.<sup>214</sup> The martyrs after death continue in the same role that everyone else in the congregation does. Everyone in the church, dead or alive, should pray for the continuation of Christ’s witness through that Catholic church. Instead of a hierarchy of patronage, Augustine viewed the church as a family of brothers

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<sup>211</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 273.9 (PL 38:1252). Non enim homines estis, et illi homines non fuerunt: non enim nati estis, et illi aliunde nati sunt: non enim alterius generis carnem portaverunt, quam vos portatis. Ex Adam omnes sumus, in Christo omnes esse conamur (trans. Hill).

<sup>212</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 285.5.

<sup>213</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 325.1 (PL 38:1447). De gloria martyrum locuturos, breviter iustam causam martyrum locuturos, adiuvent nos orationes martyrum (trans. Hill).

<sup>214</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 305A.10.

and sisters. Members, living or dead, had different gifts and roles, but they all had the same Father.

Second, Augustine expanded the crown of martyrdom to all Christians within the true church. At the turn of the fifth century, a Catholic no longer expected to die a martyr's death. In spite of a lack of opportunity to die for the faith, Augustine kept martyrdom within reach for each member of his congregation. Emphasizing the martyrs' cause and downplaying their sufferings excluded the Donatists from the definition of martyrdom, while simultaneously expanding the definition to include all those Catholics who remained true to the faith. Augustine tells his people, "What's required is the spirit of the martyr, because God, after all, does not delight in the shedding of blood. He has many hidden martyrs."<sup>215</sup> Any faithful Catholic could consider himself a "hidden martyr" as long as he had the right spirit. Augustine argues that the three Hebrew boys whom Nebuchadnezzar threw in the fire received the crown of martyrdom because they had firm faith, even though they did not suffer.<sup>216</sup> This firm faith should be coupled with endurance. Of course, faith and endurance should manifest the witnessing aspect of martyrdom. Thus Augustine advises, "Everyone who preaches where he can, he is also a martyr."<sup>217</sup>

Even though the persecutions had stopped, Christians still faced subtler hardships. In a sermon preached in the first decade of the fifth century, Augustine says, "Trials do not cease; fight them, and your crown is ready."<sup>218</sup> Augustine must have believed that his congregation

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<sup>215</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 306E.6 (Dolbeau 18). Ipse animus esse debet martyris, non enim deus fuso sanguine delectatur: multos habet martyres in occulto (trans. Hill).

<sup>216</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 296.5.

<sup>217</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 260E.2 (PLS 2:588). Quisque ubi potest praedicet, et martyr est.

<sup>218</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 328.8 (PLS 2:801). Non cessant tentationes. Pugna et corona parata est.

would find this teaching shocking, so he continues the sermon by posing the disbelieving question “when?” and then answers it. He tells those gathered that the faithful can only receive their martyrs’ crowns at death. He uses the sickbed as his illustration, and claims that illness provides great opportunity for martyrdom. According to Augustine’s sermons, charms and magical remedies for illness were still ubiquitous in North Africa at this time. By resisting the temptation to use these charms, Christians resisted the devil and bore witness to their faith in Christ.<sup>219</sup> In offering martyrdom to every Christian, Augustine moves the emphasis back to Paul’s idea of internal struggle. The cosmic battle between God and the Devil moved from the arena to back inside the Christian’s heart.

We can’t see this adversary of ours, and we can defeat him. Why can’t we see him? Because it is inside us that we experience and check what he wishes to defeat us with. You can’t see your enemy the devil, but you experience your avarice in yourself. You can’t see your enemy the devil, but you experience your lust in yourself. You can’t see your enemy the devil, but you experience your anger in yourself. Defeat what you experience inside you, and those who are stalking you outside are already defeated.<sup>220</sup>

Anyone can be a hidden martyr and receive the martyr’s crown as long as he or she heeds the example of the martyrs by resisting the devil. Augustine says, “If you overcome not a man but the devil, [...] don’t count yourself as not being a martyr. Your feast day is not indeed in the calendar, but your crown is ready waiting for you.”<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>219</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 328.8. Cf. *Serm.* 286.7; 306E.7-8.

<sup>220</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 328.8 (PLS 2:801). Et non videmus ipsum adversarium nostrum et vincimus. Quare eum non videmus? Quia unde nos vult vincere intus sentimus et domamus. Non vides inimicum tuum diabolum sed sentis in te avaritiam tuam. Non vides diabolum inimicum tuum sed sentis in te libidinem tuam. Non vides diabolum inimicum tuum sed sentis iracundiam tuam. Vince quae intus sentis et vincuntur qui insidiantur foris (trans. Hill).

<sup>221</sup>Aug. *Serm.* 306E.8 (Dolbeau 18). Si viceris non hominem, sed diabolum, [...] noli te existimare non martyrem. Non quidem celebratur sollemnitas tua, sed parata est corona tua (trans. Hill).

## **Conclusion**

Though he eagerly published the miracles performed at the shrines, overall, Augustine has a rather sober view of his flock's relationship to the martyrs. The martyrs do not mediate between God and his people; rather, they exemplified the Christian virtues. Though the persecution had ceased, any Christian could claim these virtues by looking to the same one who had bestowed them on the martyrs. In his preaching, Augustine incorporates the martyrs into the Catholic community and offers the crown of martyrdom to faithful Catholics. In the eyes of his flock, the Donatist churches lose their claim to be the Church of the Martyrs. Augustine reconstructed the tradition of martyrdom in North Africa so that his congregation would view the persecuted Donatists as outside the traditions of the Church. This act of Augustine's was one of reclaiming the martyrs for the true Church.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

During the fourth and fifth centuries, divisiveness characterized North African Christianity. The Catholics claimed to be the true church because of their communion with Christian communities around the Mediterranean. The Donatists claimed moral purity because of their persecutions and their close association with the martyrs. Even though the Donatists claimed to be the “Church of the Martyrs,” all Christians in North Africa participated in the martyr cults. Therefore, by the end of the fourth century, North Africa’s cult of the martyrs had become a weapon in the war between these rival communions.

Through his sermons on the lives and deaths of the martyrs, Augustine of Hippo sought to sever the Donatists’ link to the martyrs and reclaim them for his own communion. Augustine carefully defined and redefined martyrdom, returning it to the New Testament ideal of the μάρτυς as a testifier or witness. Augustine reconstructs martyrdom as the act of bearing witness, ignoring the notions of sacrifice that often attended it in the popular martyr texts. Martyrdom contained no elements of propitiation; Augustine claimed that God purposed the deaths of the faithful to be evangelistic.

This reconstruction provides Augustine’s foundation for warning his flock against viewing martyrdom as the Donatists did. According to Augustine, voluntary martyrdom was unacceptable for Christians. No good could come from the evil act of self-killing, and voluntary martyrdom denied the martyrs’ true desire for life. Augustine argues that the self-offerings of

the Circumcellions were incompatible with the Christian faith, distinguishing further the actions of the true church from the misdeeds of the most notorious of the schismatics.

Not all Donatists who suffered, however, suffered voluntarily. Both the Donatist and Catholic churches appreciated martyrdom as a holy spectacle. By focusing on the struggle, Donatists could link their martyrs, such as Maximian and Isaac, to those martyrs from the era before Constantine. While Augustine finds the idea of the holy spectacle useful, he shifts its emphasis. He taught that Christians must not admire the sufferings of martyrs for their own sakes; Christians must look past the sufferings to honor the cause of the martyrs. That cause belongs solely to the Catholics. Donatism had no claim on martyrdom because it did not share with martyrdom the proper cause of the true church. Augustine claims that even though the Donatists might have the right baptism, they did not have *caritas*. Without *caritas*, which manifests itself in unity, the Donatists could not claim to be the Church of the Martyrs.

Augustine instructed his congregation how they must act in light of their position as heirs to the martyrs. Honoring the martyrs should not include dissolute feasting. Christians honored their special dead when they imitated the martyrs' spiritual virtues. According to Augustine, when Christians imitated these virtues, they bore witness to the same spiritual realities to which the martyrs bore witness. The martyrs occupied a special place in the church, but the key for Augustine was that they were "in" the church, not above it. He incorporated them into the universal holy congregation that comprised both the living and the dead. Augustine's emphasis on the martyrs' witness bearing allowed him to offer martyrdom to all Catholics regardless of persecution's presence or absence. Any faithful Christian could look forward to the promise of a martyr's crown. Through his redefining and reconceptualizing of the experience of martyrdom, Augustine reclaims not only the martyrs for the North African Catholics, but he also

reclaims martyrdom itself, in spite of his communion's post-Constantinian peace. Augustine's church was not merely the "Church of the Martyrs;" he believed it was the church for the martyrs.

Augustine's understanding of how the martyrs related to the Donatist and Catholic churches is significant for understanding both martyrdom and the cult of the martyrs in late antiquity. In his sermons on the martyrs, Augustine evinces a preoccupation with the Donatists that demonstrates the local character of the North African martyr cult. Many of Augustine's concerns regarding the martyr cult are unique to his time and place in history. In light of this fact, historians should avoid generalizations about the cult of martyrs whenever possible. There was not a cult of the martyrs, but rather innumerable cults of the martyrs. Christian communities around the Mediterranean did not have a tradition of venerating the martyrs; rather many traditions existed. Even when praxis coincided, the meanings imputed to that praxis could vary from group to group, and even individual to individual.<sup>222</sup>

Similarly, studying Augustine's sermons helps correct earlier generalizations regarding the Donatist controversy, such as Frend's, which viewed Donatism as a resurgence of indigenous North African culture. The sermons suggest that the churches' battle was over ideas. Bishops could wage war with each other on the theological level, but they fought at the lowest levels too, using the homily to persuade their flocks. Indeed, a bishop who lost his flock to a rival might have little standing to address the concerns of North African Christianity more broadly. Reading the sermons communicates the sense of urgency with which Augustine and the

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<sup>222</sup>I was privileged to hear a fine paper delivered by Phil Booth of Cambridge on the cult of Cosmas and Damian in Constantinople. Booth demonstrated that one shrine in Constantinople peaceably served both Arian and Orthodox Christians. Even one localized cult might not be describable in monolithic terms. Phil Booth, "Competing Discourses and Cultural Pluralism in the Cult(s) of Saints Cosmas and Damian" (paper presented at *An Age of Saints? Sainthood, Scepticism and Authority in the Mediterranean Koine c. 200-900 AD*, Trinity College, University of Cambridge, September 2007).

other Catholic bishops fought the Donatists. Souls were at stake, and lost sheep had to be rounded up.

By analyzing Augustine's feast day sermons that attack Donatism, this study highlights a frequently overlooked aspect of Augustine's life, his role as pastor. In the sermons, Augustine demonstrates his concern for his flock and his desire to correct their theology as well as their behavior. By focusing on the New Testament's definition of "martyr," Augustine demonstrates his zeal for biblical exposition even when he is not preaching from a biblical text. Augustine's life and preaching are the product of unique circumstances acting upon powerful ideas. By attending closely to how in his preaching he accommodates those ideas to his flock, we can better understand both Augustine as a person and his context.

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## VITA

Collin Garbarino is a native of Elton, Louisiana. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in history from Louisiana Tech University in May 1998. In May 2005, he earned a Master of Divinity in biblical and theological studies from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Collin currently resides in Baton Rouge, Louisiana with his wife, Sarah, and their two daughters, Claire and Evangeline.