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Ecclesiology

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## THE WORK OF OPTATUS AS A TURNING POINT IN THE AFRICAN ECCLESIOLOGY



THE INFLUENTIAL LECTURES of Pierre Batiffol on the three zones of papal power in the early Church were first delivered a half century ago in Strasbourg. The steady increase of Roman power and influence over the Western Church, the second zone in Batiffol's construction, is one of the clear developments of the early centuries. Nevertheless, one vital section of the Latin Church remained throughout its history a reluctant witness to the reception of that growth of Roman power. The Catholic Church of Latin North Africa<sup>1</sup> consistently maintained an ambivalent attitude of simultaneous respect for Rome as a see whose apostolic credentials were most impressive, combined with a considerable sensitivity about its own autonomy and traditions.

It is the purpose of this study to consider the position of one of the lesser lights among the African churchmen, Optatus, bishop of the Numidian town of Milev or Milevis (*fl.c.370*), the earliest theological defender of the Catholic position in the Donatist schism. Further, it is the contention of the study that, due to the circumstances in which he lived and wrote, the

<sup>1</sup> For earlier bibliography, see J. Quasten, *Patrology* II (1953), especially the articles on Tertullian and Cyprian. More recent studies include:

J. P. Brisson, *Autonomisme et Christianisme dans l'Afrique romaine de Septime Sévère à l'invasion vandale*. (Paris, 1958). (Cyprien, 33-121).

W. Marschall, *Karthago und Rom. Die Stellung der nordafrikanischen Kirche zum apostolischen Stuhl in Rom*. (Stuttgart, 1971).

J. Ratzinger, *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustins Lehre von der Kirche*. (Munich, 1954). (Tertullian-Cyprian-Optatus, 44-123).

W. Simonis, *Ecclesia Visibilis et Invisibilis*. Untersuchungen zur Ekklesiologie und Sakramentenlehre in der afrikanischen Tradition von Cyprian bis Augustinus. (Frankfurt, 1970).

U. Wickert, *Sacramentum Unitatis*. Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der Kirche bei Cyprian. (Berlin, 1971).

discussion of the position of Africa in relation to the Roman Church attained a new and crucial level with Optatus. It may even be said that with Optatus the African tradition reached a turning point in its history but that, as A. J. P. Taylor observed of the year 1848 in German history, it failed to turn. The African attitude failed to develop much further in its view of Rome during the years of Augustine and Aurelius of Carthage. It could be profuse in its words of respect, as in the *Epistola familiaris*,<sup>2</sup> or proud and even harsh as in the Apiarius affair and the question of African appeals to Rome.<sup>3</sup> The thought of Optatus is an opening for the future but it is also a development that must be seen in the context of the African tradition, above all that of the ecclesiological thought of Cyprian. Therefore, it is necessary first of all to survey briefly the ideas of Tertullian and Cyprian on the place of Rome in the world Church.

### *Tertullian*

The attitude of Tertullian (+ after 220) toward the question of the position of Rome in the Church can best be judged from two writings in particular, the early *De Praescriptione Haereticorum* and one of his last works, the *De Pudicitia*. In seeking a short way with all heretics, Tertullian brilliantly takes up and develops the argument formulated by Irenaeus in his *Adversus Haereses*. This argument, devised principally with the spurious traditions of the Gnostics in mind, combines the elements of the monepiscopate from Ignatius with the idea of apostolic succession from Clement of Rome. To the Gnostic's boast of being the spiritual heir of one of the Apostles, usually one of the more obscure ones, Irenaeus counters that the logical place to seek the teaching of Christ in the contemporary world is the Churches which his Apostles founded. Christ undoubtedly entrusted his teachings to these same Apostles who in turn passed them on to the Churches they founded. The essence of the argument applies to any Church of apostolic foundation

<sup>2</sup> *Epistola familiaris* = Augustine *Ep.* 177. (CSEL 44, 669 ff. Goldbacher).

<sup>3</sup> Marschall, *op. cit.*, 161 ff.

but, for brevity's sake, Irenaeus confines himself to stressing the greatness of the Roman community. Though he also mentions Polycarp, and the Churches of Smyrna and Ephesus, subsequent debate has centered on the interpretation of his words about Rome.

Tertullian's version of this argument is clearer and more incisive. These Churches of apostolic foundation are the *matrices* and *originales fidei*, which have undoubtedly transmitted through time and space what they received from the Apostles.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, then, if any doctrine does not conform to the teaching of these Churches, it is to be rejected as false, a foreign body in the bloodstream of the Church's life. Since dialogue over the interpretation of biblical passages is usually fruitless, the intelligent activity for the diligent searcher after truth to pursue is to turn to the Church of apostolic foundation geographically closest to him. It is at this point that Tertullian makes it clear that this appeal to the testimony of the apostolic churches does not place unique emphasis on the beliefs of the Roman community alone.

"Run through the apostolic churches, where the very thrones of the apostles preside to this day over their districts. . . . If Achaea is nearest to you, you have Corinth. If you are not far from Macedonia, you have Philippi and Thessalonica. If you can go to Asia, you have Ephesus. If you are close to Italy, you have Rome, the nearest authority for us also."<sup>5</sup> The Church of Rome is prestigious in its martyred founder-Apostles, Peter and Paul (to whom Tertullian adds the legend of John), but the appeal to apostolic truth is fulfilled with as equal validity by Ephesus as by Rome. A later echo of this same reasoning is found in the author's *Adversus Marcionem* IV.5.1.

From this evidence taken from an early and orthodox point in Tertullian's Christian life, we move to a moment near the end of his life when his opinions had become much more extreme. These late references are much more problematical

<sup>4</sup> Tertullian, *De Prae. Haer.*, 21 (CCL 1, 202-3 Refoulé).

<sup>5</sup> Tertullian, *De Prae. Haer.*, 36 (CCL 1, 216).

insofar as the much discussed opponent bishop of the *De Pudicitia* remains unknown. Earlier scholars were convinced that the object of Tertullian's scorn was a Roman bishop, possibly Zephyrinus (+c.217), or, more probably, Callistus (+c.222), who was attacked by Hippolytus, a Roman traditionalist, for alleged laxist innovations in the penitential discipline. More recently, the weight of opinion has swung in favor of an African bishop.<sup>6</sup> At present there seems to be no consensus upon which a decision can be made in favor of a clear reference to Rome and its bishop.

It is plain, however, that Tertullian indignantly rejects this extension of special indulgence to adulterers and fornicators within the Christian ranks. With heavy sarcasm he sees in his opponent a "bishop of bishops."<sup>7</sup> It may be said by way of inference that he rejects this pretention as well. But the significance of such a rejection is lessened considerably by a glance at what his own ecclesiology has become by this time. Tertullian agrees that the Church has the power to forgive sins, but this is not the Church which is identified with the *numerus episcoporum*.<sup>8</sup> Rather it is the Church of the Spirit through the man who has the Spirit.

It is in this same chapter that the intriguing phrase occurs: ". . . *ad te, id est, ad omnem ecclesiam Petri propinquam*." Tertullian uses the phrase in discussing the opinions of the bishop who claims the authority to forgive these serious sins. Inasmuch as the identity or even the location of this bishop remains a subject of continuing disagreement, one is at a loss to know how to evaluate such an expression. In short, Tertullian's writings, fascinating as they are from other points of view, contribute little to answering our questions about African-Roman relations in the early third century. The clearest references to Rome as a norm of doctrine, in the *De Praescriptione*, do not attribute to it any fundamentally different or unique position.

<sup>6</sup> See J. Quasten, *op. cit.*, 234-5.

<sup>7</sup> Tertullian, *De Pud.*, 1 (CCL 2, 1281-2 Dekkers).

<sup>8</sup> Tertullian, *De Pud.*, 21 (CCL 2, 1328).

*Cyprian*

The ecclesiological position of Cyprian (+ 258) is more complex and, from the point of view of its legacy, more significant. The complexity arises in part from the quantity of material to be found in Cyprian's correspondence where ecclesial questions predominate. From another point of view, his conception of the structures of the Church is rather clear and definite. Yet his use of a certain Petrine terminology has made his theology a battleground for Catholic and Protestant polemicists over the centuries.

Cyprian's Church is a communion of essentially equal local Churches. "His Church is one and the faith is one; and the cement of fellowship binds all the people together into the body's solid unity. That unity cannot be broken; that one body cannot be divided by any cleavage of its structure. . . ." <sup>9</sup> These local communities which are the Catholic Church in the various cities and localities around the world are united with one another by multiple ties,<sup>10</sup> yet it is in and through the bishops that these links are most clearly made visible. The Church is built on the bishops. "Thus through the changes of times and successions, the ordination of bishops and the organization of the Church run through so that the Church is governed through these same leaders."<sup>11</sup> The people are to follow their bishop closely: ". . . the people united to their bishop and the flock clinging to their shepherd are the Church."<sup>12</sup> Those who are not found with the rightful bishop are simply not in the Church. This Church, which for Cyprian is largely identified with the *numerus episcoporum*, is held together by the union of the bishops among themselves. ". . . The Church which is one, Catholic, is not divided nor rent, but is certainly united and joined, in turn, by the cement of the bishops adhering to one another."<sup>13</sup> Though many, they are one, or should be one

<sup>9</sup> Cyprian, *De Unit.*, 23 (OECT 94 Bevenot).

<sup>10</sup> Similarly for Tertullian. See *De Prae. Haer.*, 20 (CCL 1, 202).

<sup>11</sup> Cyprian to the Lapsed, *Ep.* 33.1 (Ed. Bayard Paris, 1962<sup>2</sup> 84).

<sup>12</sup> Cyprian to Florentius, *Ep.* 66.8 (Bayard 226).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

“. . . episcopate diffused in a harmonious multitude of many bishops.”<sup>14</sup>

Cyprian never specifies exactly what this *glutinum concordiae* is and, as his later history shows, it could wear dangerously thin in times of friction between Rome and Carthage. Another of Cyprian's ecclesiological principles almost guaranteed such a crisis. He expresses it succinctly in the *De Unitate*: “The authority of the bishops forms a unity, of which each holds his part in its totality.”<sup>15</sup> The whole episcopate is to be united but, whatever authority and power there is, is held equally by each bishop. His opening statement to the Council of Carthage in September 256 is equally unmistakable.

It remains that upon this same matter each of us should bring forward what we think, judging no man, nor rejecting anyone from the right of communion, if he should think differently from us. For neither does any of us set himself up as a bishop of bishops, nor by tyrannical terror does any compel his colleague to the necessity of obedience; since every bishop, according to the allowance of his liberty and power, has his own proper right of judgment, and can no more be judged by another than he himself can judge another. But let us all wait for the judgment of Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the only one that has the power both of preferring us in the government of his Church and of judging us in our conduct there.<sup>16</sup>

These words, of course, were spoken in the course of the controversy with Stephen, but they do not represent novel ideas or ad hoc solutions for Cyprian. For example, he had recently rebuked an African bishop for constituting himself an *episcopus episcopi* when he judged Cyprian rashly.<sup>17</sup> Unlike Stephen, Cyprian and his African colleagues do not “apply force to anyone, nor do we give any law since each leader has in the administration of the Church, the free will of his own volition as one who will render an account of his action to his Lord.”<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Cyprian to Antonianus *Ep.* 55.24 (Bayard 147).

<sup>15</sup> Cyprian, *De Unit.* 5 (OECT 64).

<sup>16</sup> *Sententiae Episcoporum* (CSEL 3, 1 435-6 Hartel).

<sup>17</sup> Cyprian to Florentius *Ep.* 66.3 (Bayard 222).

<sup>18</sup> Cyprian and other African bishops to Stephen *Ep.* 72.3 (Bayard 262).

Among the early letters of the Cyprianic corpus, there are several representing an exchange between the Roman clergy, probably led by Novatian after the death of Bishop Fabian in the Decian persecution, and Cyprian who had escaped arrest by going into hiding. In *Ep.8* the Romans, writing to the Christians of Carthage, seem to cast doubt on the validity of Cyprian's decision. In replying, Cyprian apparently feels the need to justify his course of action to Rome.<sup>19</sup> Some would see this as evidence of Roman superiority in that Cyprian feels obliged to explain his decision to Rome and to its presbyterium at that. The somewhat agitated tone of *Ep.9* can be explained adequately by Cyprian's upset about slanders being circulated in Rome against him.

More generally, these letters and others must be understood within the context of the ecclesiology of *communio, koinonia*. Each Church is obliged to concern itself with the welfare of its sister Churches: e.g., Rome for Carthage, *Ep.8*; *Ep.36.4* "For it becomes all of us to be on our guard for the body of the whole Church. . . ."; Carthage for Arles, *Ep.68.3*. Roman letters of admonition and advice are read in Africa but so are African letters of similar purpose read in Rome. (*Ep. 59.19*)<sup>20</sup> Cyprian's principle of the autonomy of each bishop is even cited with approval by the Roman presbyters in a letter acknowledging the justice and wisdom of Cyprian's measures taken during and after the persecution. Minds sanctioned by the vigor of evangelical discipline are accustomed to be content with God alone as judge, they say, but Cyprian is doubly praiseworthy for his modesty in that he has sought approval for his actions from his brethren.<sup>21</sup> To these sentiments Cyprian replies by extolling the value of mutual consultation among the Churches. A similar appeal for consultation directed

<sup>19</sup> Cyprian to the Roman Clergy *Epp. 9* and *20* (Bayard 22 and 53).

<sup>20</sup> Roman Clergy to Cyprian *Ep. 36.4* (Bayard 92); Cyprian to Stephen *Ep. 68.3* (Bayard 236); Cyprian to Cornelius *Ep. 59.19* (Bayard 188).

<sup>21</sup> Roman Clergy to Cyprian *Ep. 30.1* (Bayard 71). Fr. Bevenot, basing himself on this reference has suggested that Cyprian's concept of episcopal autonomy originated in Rome itself. See "A Bishop is responsible to God alone" *RSR* 39 (1951), 397-415. (*Mélanges Jules Lebreton I*).



to Stephen a few years later seems to have fallen on deaf ears.<sup>22</sup>

The broad outlines of Cyprian's views on Church organization and government stand out clearly enough. Where does Rome fit into this picture? Like all the African authors, Cyprian honors Rome as the first see of the West because it is a greater city than Carthage and especially because of its relation to the greatest of the Apostles, Peter and Paul. But he does not thereby grant it authority over Carthage, the second see.<sup>23</sup> Carthage should be emphasized because there are two instances recorded in Cyprian's correspondence of Roman intervention outside of the Italian peninsula. As usual in these early centuries, it would be very helpful to have more information than we do in order to clarify these affairs. In the first instance, that of the deposed Spanish bishops, Basilides and Martial, the former of whom had appealed to Stephen, Cyprian urges non-compliance or resistance on the Spanish faithful. He does not contest Stephen's right to act but simply blames him for negligence in not ascertaining the facts. We do not know the outcome of the case, but it can be assumed that some Roman power of intervention or at least of moral suasion was recognized because it was sought by the deposed bishops and its use distressed the Spanish Christians.

*Ep.* 68 presents the opposite situation. Cyprian urges Stephen to intervene, this time in Gaul where bishop Marcian of Arles is flaunting his ties with the Roman rigorist, Novatian. Again, many of the circumstances are not clear: Why have the other bishops of Gaul taken no action? What is Stephen being urged to do? In partial answer to the latter question it should be noted that one of Cyprian's more pressing concerns here is the fact that the world Church still appears to tolerate Marcian in its communion. Marcian insults the college of bishops by his views but does not yet seem to be cut off.<sup>24</sup>

Stephen is to tell the local bishops in Gaul to desist from

<sup>22</sup> Cyprian to Roman Clergy *Ep.* 35.1 (Bayard 88). Cyprian and other African bishops to Stephen *Ep.* 72.1 (Bayard 259-60).

<sup>23</sup> Cyprian to Cornelius *Ep.* 52.2 (Bayard 127).

<sup>24</sup> Cyprian to Stephen *Ep.* 68.2 (Bayard 235).

tolerating Marcian by remaining in communion with him. Furthermore, Stephen should write to the province and to the people of Arles that another may be substituted in place of Marcian. This phrase "province and people" has the ring of a formula indicating a call for a new election in Arles rather than that Stephen is simply going to appoint a new bishop himself, as some have claimed. Finally, Cyprian's request that Stephen inform him of the name of the new bishop points up Rome's position and function as a center for communicating such information which is so basic to Cyprian's view of the Church as a communion.

The terms *matrix*, *radix* and others of some import for our subject occur frequently in Cyprian's correspondence. It will be recalled that Tertullian referred to the Churches of apostolic origin as the *matrices et originales* of the faith.<sup>25</sup> Cyprian's use of terms like *matrix* and *radix* refer normally to the Catholic Church as opposed to its schismatic rivals and counterfeits rather than to any local Church in particular. This is true, for example, in *Ep.*48.3 where Cyprian, writing to Cornelius, reports that he has advised travellers leaving for Rome to recognize and cling to the "*ecclesiae catholicae matrix et radix.*" This expression has sometimes been understood as referring to the Roman Church itself. In reality, it means that the African Catholics must, upon reaching Rome, adhere to the party of Cornelius rather than that of Novatian, for it is the former that is the Catholic Church in Rome. Novatian, on the contrary, has refused the "*radicis et matris sinus,*" whereas Cyprian and the Catholics hold to the "*ecclesiae unius caput et radicem.*"<sup>26</sup>

The *matrix et radix* to which Cyprian refers, then, is the Catholic Church rather than the Roman Church. In later literature it becomes clear that Rome is increasingly looked upon as the center of communion for the Western Church. In Cyprian, however, this point is sometimes obscure. In some

<sup>25</sup> Tertullian *De Prae. Haer.* 21 (CCL 1, 202).

<sup>26</sup> Cyprian to Cornelius *Ep.* 48.3 (Bayard 118); Cyprian to Cornelius *Ep.* 45.1 (Bayard 112); Cyprian to Jubaianus *Ep.* 73.2 (Bayard 263).

places, for example, it seems that Cyprian is referring to communion with Rome precisely as a sign of communion with the world Church. Writing to Antonianus, an African bishop, Cyprian notes: "You also wrote that I should forward a copy of this same letter to Cornelius, our colleague, that casting aside all solicitude, he might know immediately that you are in communion with him, i.e., with the Catholic Church."<sup>27</sup> The context shows, however, that what is in question is, again, the issue of which Roman leader, Cornelius or Novatian, represents the Catholic Church in Rome. In *Ep.55*, there evidently has been some question about which party Bishop Antonianus supports. Similarly, in *Ep.48.3*, Cyprian assures Cornelius that the African bishops "firmly approve and maintain you and your communion, i.e., the unity and also the charity of the Catholic Church" as opposed to the communion of Novatian.<sup>28</sup>

One final aspect of Cyprian's ecclesiology that is most likely to confuse the modern reader is his use of the phrase *Cathedra Petri* and related terminology. In warning his own Carthaginian Christians against the schismatics among them, Cyprian more than once makes use of the formula: One God, One Christ, One Church and One "*Cathedra . . . super Petrum Domini voce fundata.*"<sup>29</sup> To the contemporary Catholic reader such references to Peter and unity, such wording, automatically triggers thoughts of Church unity under Petrine, i.e., papal aegis. But another reality, a more symbolic, if not less real one, is operative in Cyprian's mind.

Cyprian elaborates his ecclesiology in the context of schism within two local churches, his own and Rome. His aim in invoking Peter looks largely to the unity of the local Church under one lawful head, Cyprian himself in Carthage and Cornelius in Rome. The Petrine references, then, usually do not point to Rome alone but to the internal unity of the local

<sup>27</sup> Cyprian to Antonianus *Ep. 55.1* (Bayard 131).

<sup>28</sup> Cyprian to Cornelius *Ep. 48.3* (Bayard 118).

<sup>29</sup> Cyprian to the Catholics of Carthage *Ep. 43.5* (Bayard 107). See also *Ep. 70.3* (Bayard 255).

Church which should be one and undivided within itself under one bishop. Peter, then, as the one who received the keys, bears within his person the symbolic reality of the unicity of the Church. Cyprian writes that in bestowing the keys on Peter first, the Lord "instituted and manifested the origin of unity." Peter shows and vindicates unity. The Church is founded on Peter "*origine unitatis et ratione.*"<sup>30</sup>

The principal locus of debate remains, as it has been for a long time, the treatise on the unity of the Church, especially chapter four with its rival versions. Without entering the controversy over the authenticity or priority of either version, it can be stated that the Church polity in either case is the same and that this polity is consistent with what has thus far been discerned in Cyprian's letters. The fact that the Church is founded on Peter shows forth the unicity of the local Church. The fact that Peter is one and his *Cathedra* is one is meant to show forth unity. (TR) Christ established one chair ". . . thus establishing by his own authority the source and hallmark (*rationem*) of the (Church's) oneness." (PT) A *primatus* is given to Peter. (PT) Here again a word is used without the connotation with which later centuries would endow it.<sup>31</sup> By this is meant simply that the unity symbolized by Peter is heightened by the fact that he received the power and authority first. What is important to note is that in either version Cyprian's basic ecclesiology is clearly maintained. "No doubt the others were all that Peter was," (PT) "endowed with equal dignity and power," (TR) The meaning of chapter four can be summarized neatly in Cyprian's own words. ". . . The start (*exordium*) comes from him (Peter) alone, in order to show that the Church of Christ is unique (*una*)." (TR)

The Petrine-Unity symbolism had a long history in the

<sup>30</sup> Cyprian to Jubaianus *Ep.* 73.3 (Bayard 266); Cyprian to Pompeius *Ep.* 74.11 (Bayard 288); Cyprian and the African Council of 255 *Ep.* 70.3 (Bayard 255).

<sup>31</sup> References to the *De Unit.*, Ch. four are from the Bevenot edition, OECT, 62-5. TR = *Textus Receptus*, PT = "Primacy" text. Attention should be called to the use of the term *primatus* by Cyprian with reference to the false claims of Novatian. See *Ep.* 69.8 (Bayard 245).

African ecclesiology. It can probably be seen already in Tertullian.<sup>82</sup> It is the most prominent strain in Augustine's interpretation of Matthew 16: 18-19; for him, Peter is the *figura* or *persona ecclesiae*.<sup>83</sup> For Cyprian above all, the *Cathedra Petri* is the symbol of the divinely willed unicity of the local Church. As such, this *Cathedra* is found in every see, not just in Rome. A significant turning point would be achieved when this Petrine-Unity concept would be extended to the contemporary successors of Peter on the *cathedra episcopalis* of Rome. In at least one place Cyprian comes close to this key breakthrough. I refer to the well-known phrase of *Ep. 59.14*, where, in speaking of the boldness of schismatics who have sailed from Carthage to Rome, he refers to their destination as ". . . *ad Petri Cathedram adque ad ecclesiam principalem unde unitas sacerdotalis exorta est. . .*"<sup>84</sup>

This description of Rome does not contradict Cyprian's habitual theology as the remainder of the passage abundantly demonstrates. Here the words "Chair of Peter" are used in the double sense of rightful unit of the Catholic Church and the *Sedes* of Peter himself. What is of more interest is the designation of Rome as the *ecclesia principalis*. This may well be translated not as the "principal Church" but as the "primordial Church" (Bevenot) or the "Urkirche" (Poschmann), an interpretation for which there are interesting parallels in Optatus. More importantly, this whole clause, the expression *ecclesia principalis* as well as what follows, gives the hint of a transference of the Petrine-Unity symbolism to the contemporary third-century Church of Rome. Peter the symbol of unity in the local Church is also the founding Apostle of the local Roman Church. The theological symbolism associated with Peter in Cyprian's mind is here transferred to Rome. Peter, the symbol of the primordial unity of the local Church and whose temporal priority or *primatus* is the symbol of the unity of the

<sup>82</sup> Tertullian, *Scorp.* 10, 8 (CCL 2, 1088 Reifferscheid-Wissowa).

<sup>83</sup> See A. M. La Bonnardière, "*Tu es Petrus.* La Pericope Matthieu XVI, 13-23 dans l'oeuvre de S. Augustin," *Irenikon* 34 (1961), 451-499.

<sup>84</sup> Cyprian to Cornelius *Ep.* 59.14 (Bayard 183).

Apostles among themselves now sees his symbolic significance extended to the Petrine local Church *par excellence*, Rome. In this sense, Rome, which obviously is not the first Church historically, can be the symbolic primordial Church in that it inherits and extends in time and space the primordial unity symbolized by Peter himself.

Needless to say, all this does not mean that Cyprian recognizes a superior authority of command in the contemporary Roman Church or bishop. A glance at the final unfortunate correspondence concerning the baptismal question is enough to put such thoughts to rest. Cyprian and especially Firmilian of Caesarea are not impressed by what seem to be Stephen's claims to authority based on his See and succession to Peter.<sup>35</sup> In summary, then, Cyprian's ecclesiology remains remarkably consistent and uniform throughout the relatively short period of his literary activity. It is an ecclesiology of episcopal communion with wide freedom of discretion left to the individual bishop. There is no bishop of bishops. Only the good will and moderation of the bishops of the world can preserve the ". . . collegii honor, vinculum fidei et concordia sacerdotii."<sup>36</sup>

### *Optatus*

The earliest Catholic apologist of the Donatist controversy played an important role as a precursor of Augustine. Writing c.367 Optatus first collected and preserved many of the documents, both civil and ecclesiastical, associated with the complex origins of the schism. Similarly he made significant initial contributions to the solution of the theological issues of Baptism and the *notes ecclesiae*, a concept suggested by his adversary, the Donatist leader, Parmenian. For our purposes, the relevant material is what Optatus has to say about Rome and Peter.

The African situation had altered considerably in the fourth century. At the Council of Arles (314) the African Catholics

<sup>35</sup> Cyprian to Quintus *Ep.* 71.3 (Bayard 258); Firmilian to Cyprian *Ep.* 75 (Bayard 289 f.).

<sup>36</sup> *Sententiae Episcoporum* (CSEL 3, 1, 436); Cyprian to Jubaianus *Ep.* 73.26 (Bayard 278-9).

had finally agreed to abandon their traditional, but increasingly isolated, custom of rebaptizing those baptized in heretical sects. (Canon 9[8]) This in itself was something of a turning point. But the vital element to notice in Optatus's argumentation is this: the Cyprianic ecclesiology with its stress on the unicity of the local Church no longer suffices. It is no longer a question of a division in this or that local Church. Now a whole great area of the world Church finds itself divided. Every town and village has its representatives of the two rival communions. Both claim to be the one Church outside which there is no salvation. The question is simply this: Which is the true Church and which the counterfeit? *Ubi ecclesia?*<sup>37</sup> Optatus realized that appeal had to be made to the Church beyond Africa. In response to this unprecedented situation he develops the argument from Catholicity as geographical extension and universality, a weapon that quickly became standard in the Catholic arsenal. As a particular facet of this line of reasoning, he appealed to communion with Rome as a decisive sign of communion with the whole *Catholica*. It is this last area that concerns us in particular and which has considerably impressed some modern authors.<sup>38</sup>

The Catholic Church is the Church that is spread over all the lands of the earth. The African faction that is in contact and communion with this world Church is the Catholic Church in Africa. The *Pars Donati* does not fill this description. Thus the simple and constantly repeated Catholic argument. "Is she not to be in Spain, in Gaul, in Italy, where you are not? . . . in all Egypt and Mesopotamia, where you are not?" asked Optatus.<sup>39</sup> Is there something wrong with being in communion

<sup>37</sup> The importance of Optatus is recognized by Ratzinger, *op. cit.*, 103 f. and by Brisson, *op. cit.*, 161.

<sup>38</sup> For example: For Marschall, *op. cit.*, 72, Optatus goes far beyond Tertullian, Cyprian, and even Augustine. Also L. Vischer, *Basilius der Grosse* (Basel, 1953), Excursus on Optatus, 72-85. Vischer remarks that Optatus's views seem surprisingly modern when considered in relation to contemporary Roman Catholic ideas.

<sup>39</sup> Optatus, *Contra Parmenianum Donatistam* II, 1, 11; III, 9. (CSEL 26, 33, 47, 93 Ziwsa). An English translation of Optatus was made by O. R. Vassall-Phillips in 1917.

with the Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians, and the seven Churches of Asia?<sup>40</sup> The intent of this line of reasoning is clear enough.

One of the similarities between Cyprian's terminology and that of Optatus is to be found in their use of the concept of the Catholic Church as the *radix*. Unfilial children that they are, the Donatists have cut themselves off "from the root of Mother Church." Catholics, on the other hand, are faithful and remain in the root with the rest of the world."<sup>41</sup> Initially, at least, Optatus's discussion of the concept of the *Cathedra Petri* is also a legacy from Cyprian. In Book I, while discussing the question of where the original blame for the schism should be placed, he notes that it was not Caecilian but Majorinus, the short-lived predecessor of Donatus, who separated himself "a *Cathedra Petri vel Cypriani*." This use of the *Cathedra Petri* does not refer to Rome but to the rightful see of Carthage. The present *Cathedra* of Parmenian, on the other hand, had no existence before Majorinus wrongfully established it.<sup>42</sup> As with Cyprian, Optatus has at least the rudiments of the symbolic use of Peter as the representative of the whole Church, a symbolism which Augustine will expand. For the sake of unity Peter alone received the keys which he communicated to the rest. He is the "*forma unitatis*" and the *sanctae ecclesiae . . . persona*."<sup>43</sup>

Optatus's most significant discussion of the *Cathedra* concept is to be found in Book II, where he considers Parmenian's theory of the *dotēs* or endowments of the Church. These *dotēs* are six in number: *Cathedra*, *Angelus*, *Spiritus*, *Fons*, *Sigillum*, and *Umbilicus*. The first is the decisive one as Optatus realizes. Parmenian, of course, claimed that the Donatist Church possessed these endowments. Optatus sets out to reclaim them

<sup>40</sup> Optatus, II, 6, 14; VI, 3. (CSEL 26, 42-3, 49, 147).

<sup>41</sup> Optatus, I, 11, 15, 28; III, 7. (CSEL 26, 14, 18, 31, 88).

<sup>42</sup> Optatus, I, 10, 15. (CSEL 26, 12-3, 17).

<sup>43</sup> Optatus, I, 10; II, 9; VII, 3. (CSEL 26, 12, 45, 170-1). In Book VII, Optatus argues strongly against the Donatist rejection of the Catholic Church as the Church of sinners and traitors by pointing out that, though Peter denied Christ, he was still singled out for special honor.



for the Catholics. The question, he says, is this: "We must see who was the first to sit on the *Cathedra* and where he sat."<sup>44</sup>

You cannot then deny that you know that upon Peter first in the city of Rome was conferred the episcopal chair, on which sat Peter, the head of all the Apostles, whence he was called Cephas,<sup>45</sup> that in this one chair unity should be preserved by all, lest the other Apostles might uphold each for himself separate chairs, so that he who should set up a second chair, against the unique chair would already be a schismatic and a sinner.<sup>46</sup>

This passage could be interpreted completely in the same line as Cyprian's argumentation in the *De Unitate Ecclesiae*. The one Chair of Peter has been established to preclude the dangers of possible centrifugal tendencies on the part of the other apostles or bishops. Anyone setting himself against this chair is a schismatic.

Yet it is immediately evident that there is more here. Specific mention has already been made of Peter *in Rome* and the passage continues at once with the list of Roman bishops who have succeeded to that one chair on which Peter first sat. The list ends with Optatus's contemporary, Siricius, "*qui noster est socius: cum quo nobis totius orbis commercio formatarum in una communionis societate concordat.*"<sup>47</sup>

The Donatists are challenged to demonstrate the origins of their *Cathedra*. At once, a second time the discussion returns to Rome, for the Donatists also have a Roman bishop. Optatus easily demonstrates the fatuousness of this argument. The Donatists constitute only a tiny minority in the city. It is ludicrous for them to claim the *Cathedra Petri* since their man in Rome probably has never even been allowed to approach the *memoriae apostolorum*. There is a Donatist episcopal succession at Rome but it can be traced back only to Victor of Garba in the early fourth century and no further. Optatus

<sup>44</sup> Optatus, II, 2, 5, 6. (CSEL 26, 36, 42-3).

<sup>45</sup> Optatus is the first to make the connection: Caput-Kephale-Cephas. See Y. Congar, "Cephas-Cephale-Caput," *Revue du Moyen Age Latin*, 8 (1952) 5-42.

<sup>46</sup> Optatus, II, 2. (CSEL 26, 36).

<sup>47</sup> Optatus, II, 3. (CSEL 26, 37).

can ridicule the Donatist Church of Rome whose only *Cathedra*, he suggests, is the *Cathedra Pestilentiae*. He labels this Roman bishopric of theirs a subterfuge, yet he also admits that there were pastoral motives involved in the original despatch of Victor from Africa. While the original Donatist motivation may have been mixed, the discussion of this small Roman community by Optatus must be interpreted as showing that the Donatists of his day attempted to use it as a proof that they too were in communion with Rome.

The *Cathedra Petri* symbolism has been expanded to meet the new regional challenge of Donatism that has replaced the old problem of local schism. The Chair of Peter in the old Cyprianic framework is still a valid concept, but the further decisive step has been taken of seeing a special Chair of Peter in the world Church. This is the Church in Rome where Peter had first sat on the *cathedra episcopalis*. Rome is now the center of communion, at least for the West, through which pass those papers of ecclesial recognition, the (*litterae*) *formatae* or *communicatoriae*.<sup>48</sup> The fact that the Catholics can show that they are in communion with Rome proves that they alone have rightful claim to the *dos* of the *Cathedra* and through the *Cathedra* to the *Angelus* and the other endowments enumerated by Parmenian. Peter is at the head of the Catholic line of bishops as opposed to the Donatist line.<sup>49</sup>

All of this, let it be said again, does not indicate any belief on Optatus's part in some kind of modern understanding of the papal primacy. Even in the question of communion with the Church outside Africa, Optatus mentions the importance of communion with the seven Churches of Asia.<sup>50</sup> Yet the new

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Optatus, II, 6, 9. (CSEL 26, 42-3, 45). According to Optatus, Peter is "*princeps noster*," II, 4 (CSEL 26, 39) whereas the Donatists have their own founders, "*principes vestri*," VI, 3 (CSEL 26, 147). As with the Cyprianic "*ecclesia principalis*" the words "*princeps*" and "*principalis*" point to the origin of the Churches.

<sup>50</sup> Optatus, II, 6 (CSEL 26, 42-3). He has the strong statement: "*Extra septem ecclesias quicquid foris est, alienum est.*" Optatus probably brings in the seven churches of Asia at this point because he is discussing the *Angelus* endow-

element hinted at in Cyprian emerges full blown in Optatus. This is the transfer of the Petrine-Unity symbolism from the local level to the world level of the universal Church or at least of the Western Church. Optatus's use of the *Cathedra Petri* concept, while based on Cyprian's usage, has gone beyond it. This leap to a new level of understanding has been brought about by the new and hitherto unknown experience of total regional schism with rival groups offering basically the same doctrines, the same practices, the same sacraments. The shift in meaning was probably brought about more rapidly by the appeal to geographical catholicity, the most commonly repeated argument against Donatist particularism.

A new plateau was reached by Optatus, but there were many other, much steeper ascents to be made before any conception of Roman authority comparable to that found in the modern Western Church would be attained. Yet, intriguingly enough, it can be argued that neither Augustine nor any other African theologian ever really advanced beyond Optatus in recognizing a special position for the Roman bishop in the world Church. Because the triumph of Islam forever closed the book of the history of Christian North Africa, we shall never know what might have been the African reaction to a Gregory VII, a Boniface VIII, or a Pius IX.

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ment and this brings to mind the *Angeli* of the book of Revelation. The reference occurs at other places in this literature, e. g., Cyprian, *Ad Fortunatum* 11: "Cum septem liberis plane copulatur et mater origo et radix quae ecclesias septem postmodum peperit, ipsa prima et una super Petrum Domini voce fundata." (CSEL, 3, 1, 338). Augustine also makes use of the same argument.