

## Donatism: the Last Phase

THE purpose of this paper is to question some generally held assumptions concerning the character of Donatism, and its relations with the Catholic Church, during the later period of Byzantine rule in North Africa. The features of the Donatist Church during its classical period, in the fourth and fifth centuries, are now well known. They are conveniently surveyed by Dr Frend in his magisterial study of the movement.<sup>1</sup> He has established, definitively in my view, that the schism in the African Church had roots far deeper than historians had previously discerned. The theological divergence between Catholicism and Dissent, as he put it, 'was interwoven with other differences, such as geography, culture and economic circumstance.'<sup>2</sup> 'The two churches were in fact two societies, differing fundamentally in outlook on both religious and social questions.'<sup>3</sup>

The struggles between the two churches reached their climax during Augustine's episcopate, on the eve of the Vandal occupation of Africa. During their course African Catholicism 'became progressively more dependent on the Roman see in ecclesiastical questions and on the Roman authorities for material support... At the death of Augustine the alliance between Church and Empire had become complete.'<sup>4</sup> It need hardly be stated that this alignment between Church and State was one of the issues over which the two churches stood most sharply opposed. The view I wish to question is that this description of the situation fits the case as it stood around A.D. 600; or, in other words, to ask whether the

<sup>1</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, Oxford 1952.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 333.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 332.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 324.

## Donatism: the Last Phase

situation at this time bears any significant resemblance to the situation as it had been in the first quarter of the fifth century. The life of the African Church during much of the intervening period has to be reconstructed in large part from archaeological evidence. Much of this still remains to be explored; the existing material is fragmentary, and my knowledge of it even more so. I shall, therefore, confine myself to the plentiful literary material contained in the correspondence of Pope Gregory the Great.

Gregory's letters provide ample evidence of the survival of Donatism in Africa at the end of the sixth century; and, especially in Numidia, if we may believe him, even of a revival on a considerable scale and 'spreading daily' (*Ep.* ii, 46; cf. *Epp.* i, 72, iv, 32). Gregory's attempts to counter this resurgence have been often described, admirably by Homes Dudden<sup>1</sup> and by Dr Frend<sup>2</sup>; but the particular complexion of the problems which faced him has not, so far as I know, been studied yet. Gregory's correspondence contains a great deal to suggest that the Donatist revival had led to a situation very different from that obtaining in the heyday of the two churches' stark, embattled stance of mutual hostility in the fourth and early-fifth centuries. Now the two churches appear to have found a *modus vivendi*. Catholics, we learn, widely allow their families and dependents to become Donatists (*Ep.* vi, 34). Donatist clergy are placed in charge of churches by Catholic bishops, and are even alleged to be promoted over the heads of their Catholic colleagues (*Ep.* i, 82). Ex-Donatists could become Catholic bishops, though Gregory drew the line at their becoming primates of their province (*Ep.* i, 75): it may be inferred that the African episcopate would have had no objection. Catholic bishops are willing to issue licences for the consecration of bishops for the local Donatist community. The text of Gregory's letter concerned with a particularly interesting case of this (*Ep.* ii, 46)<sup>3</sup> shows that the Donatist

<sup>1</sup> F. Homes Dudden, *Gregory the Great*, London 1905, I, 414-28.

<sup>2</sup> Op. cit. 309-12.

<sup>3</sup> MGH, *Epp.* i, 147, lines 5-9: 'Propterea igitur petitione insinuaverunt nobis praesentium latro Constantius et Mustelus et asserunt ecclesiae Pudentianae diacones Numidia provincia constitutae Maximianum ecclesiae eiusdem antistitem in loco quo deget, corruptum premio, Donatistarum episcopum nova licentia fieri permisisse...'. The explanation *in loco quo deget* would be unnatural if the place were Pudentiana; we should in this case expect some phrase like *in eodem loco*. This situation must have been common in Numidia. In Africa episcopal sees were often located in villages and quite insignificant places. It appears that bishops often preferred to reside in villages outside

bishop in question was at the head of a community in the village where Maximianus, the Catholic bishop, resided, not in his episcopal see. It looks as if the Catholic bishop had simply agreed to the foundation of a new church in a neighbouring village, or to the consecration of a bishop for a church without its pastor, and that the community or the bishop had subsequently fallen under a suspicion of heresy, a suspicion which local people would not have entertained. It is tempting to think that the denomination of a new church founded in such circumstances scarcely mattered; it would have been widely acceptable in the locality under either Catholic or Donatist label—or, more likely, without either. Archaeological evidence might help to decide how far one should take this situation at Pudentiana as typical. It would be interesting to know very much more about churches built during this period: how many can confidently be identified as Donatist? Of those which can be so identified, how many were in places where there was not already a Catholic church in existence? Conversely, how many newly built Catholic churches were in places where there was no Donatist church? From answers to such questions one might form a more reliable impression as to how widely the need was felt—if at all—of separate provision for the two denominations in the same locality.

Gregory was quick to smell bribery behind such instances of compromise with the schismatics. He may not have been far wrong in this; but this will scarcely explain so general a state of affairs. How general the situation was, and how deeply rooted in the life of the African Church, is revealed by an examination of the obstacles that Gregory encountered in his attempts to get things changed. In one of his letters to Numidia, Gregory remarked that Donatism was making inroads on the Lord's flock 'as if it were unrestrained by any shepherd's protection' (*Ep.* iv, 35). From his outsider's point of view, he may have been very close to the truth. From the beginning of his pontificate he had been striving to get the Church and the imperial administration in Africa to combat Donatism; he had tried to get councils to concert action and to punish irregularities

their episcopal sees; cf. *Ep.* i, 72, where Gregory recommends that the primates of African provinces be chosen not automatically by seniority, but that their manner of life be also taken into account; he adds 'Ipse vero primas non passim sicut moris est per villas, sed in una iuxta eorum [i.e. the other bishops of the province] electionem civitate resideat.' Gregory wished the practice of bishops residing away from their sees to be ended, at least in the case of primates.

(*Epp.* i, 72, 75, 82; ii, 46; iii, 47, 48; iv, 7, 32), especially in the ordination of clergy. The civil authorities were not too ready to comply with Gregory's zeal, and were loath to enforce the rigour of the imperial edicts against the heretics (*Epp.* iv, 32; vi, 61). This is scarcely surprising. It fits well into the general pattern of the policies pursued by the authorities during Maurice's reign, exemplified, for instance, in the toleration extended to the Istrian schismatics in the interests of securing their loyalty to the empire during troubled times. In this case, however, the emperor had issued a *iussio* against the heretics (which has not survived: *Ep.* v, 3); but it was not enforced by the administration in Africa, as Gregory later complained (*Ep.* vi, 61). Gregory suspected some highly placed civil servants of heresy, and urged them to appear in Rome in person to clear themselves (*Ep.* iv, 41). What their heresy was is not clear from the letter; but that they thought of themselves as orthodox is beyond doubt, and that they were suspected of sympathy with Donatism is more than likely.

More interesting, however, is the attitude of the generality of African churchmen. What this was we can infer quite dramatically from the fate of one of them, Paul, the bishop of an unknown see in Numidia. This Paul had been 'subjected to annoyance' on account of his anti-Donatist zeal, and had found nobody in Africa to support and assist him. Eventually he managed to make his way to Rome, having had to struggle for at least two years with every obstacle put in the way of his journey by the authorities (*Epp.* iv, 32, 35). When he arrived in Rome he made it clear that his complaint was not that he had become hated by the Donatist minority for his crusade of repression, but that he had incurred general displeasure 'on account of his defending the Catholic faith'; and he added some dark charges against the authorities which Gregory refused to specify (*Ep.* vi, 59). But Paul had not only incurred the displeasure of the civil administration: he had also been excommunicated by a council of his province (*Ep.* vi, 59). In Africa Paul had clearly been regarded as a busybody creating unnecessary trouble by his fussy intransigence; his fellow-bishops and the imperial authorities were at one on this. The records are silent concerning his ultimate fate, after his case had been referred to the imperial court and from there back again to an African synod (*Epp.* vi, 61; vii, 2). On his return from Constantinople to Africa, to be tried there, Gregory wrote to some Numidian

bishops recommending Paul to their love and urging them not to fear influential persons but to deal with him with justice and compassion (*Epp.* viii, 13, 15). Gregory can scarcely have expected much support for Paul's views from the Numidian episcopate. He knew very well the opposition that zeal like Paul's must run into in Numidia. When a synod of Carthage (594), in obedience to an imperial *iussio*, decreed a heavy penalty on clergy who were convicted of laxity in seeking out heretics, Gregory was alarmed: it was all very well to make such decisions in the remote calm of Carthage, but what would be the reaction among the primates of other provinces more directly concerned (*Ep.* v, 3)? The letter he wrote to the bishop of Carthage on this occasion seems to me to betray a fear of an African schism which the policy decreed at Carthage might provoke, if persisted in.

Bishop Paul's case throws much light on the situation in the African Church; it is equally illuminating on the extent of papal influence in Africa. The civil administration was active in restricting its exercise (Gregory had been appealing to African officials to allow Numidian bishops to travel to Rome since 591 (cf. *Ep.* i, 72); it was not until 596 that Paul got away, with two companions); his repeated appeals for its support in repressing heresy fell on deaf ears, and the exarch was the foremost of Bishop Paul's opponents.<sup>1</sup> The secular authorities, however, were not the only obstacle to the effective assertion of papal authority in Africa. Though the papacy encouraged appeals from Africa, it is significant that all these appeals were referred back to local African tribunals by Gregory. Bishop Paul's case was the only one he had tried to get settled in Rome, and through the intervention of the civil authorities this attempt had failed. When a similar case occurred later in his pontificate, involving the primate of Byzacena, Gregory, 'seeing the perversity of men,' declined to judge the case, even though it had been referred to him by the emperor (*Epp.* ix, 24, 27); this, too, ended by being returned for judgement in Africa (*Ep.* xii, 12).

Gregory found it necessary to send frequent reminders to Africa of the authority of the Apostolic See (*Epp.* ii, 46; iv, 41; viii, 31; ix, 27); but no African bishop appears among the addressees of his letter promulgating an imperial decree among the metro-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Ep.* ix, 27 (discussed below) for another instance, in which a *Theodorus magister* had prevented a case from being heard in Rome.

### *Donatism: the Last Phase*

politans of the Western patriarchate (*Ep.* viii, 10). When a council had eventually assembled in Numidia in response to his reiterated demands, it had made a number of decisions against which Gregory protested as being 'contrary to the tradition of the fathers and the canons,' and which he tried to get rescinded with the aid of the exarch (*Ep.* iv, 7). There can be no doubt that African churchmen in general were as little inclined to view with favour his interventions as was the imperial administration. Gregory could not think of appointing a papal vicar for Africa, as he had done in other provinces.<sup>1</sup> Here he had to be content to rely on a Numidian bishop, Columbus, as his special unofficial agent and informant; and Columbus, though bound to 'St Peter, prince of the Apostles' by a special oath of loyalty (*Ep.* iii, 47), was to find the burden heavy: in 596 he complained to the pope of having become unpopular in his province because of Gregory's frequent letters to him (*Ep.* vii, 2). The African Church preferred to keep Rome at arm's length: Bishop Paul's excommunication, for instance, had been notified to Gregory, who complained about this in pained surprise, not by the primate of Paul's province, but by the exarch of Africa (*Ep.* vi, 59). Crementius, the primate of Byzacena, preferred to appeal from his own provincial council to the imperial court rather than to the pope, while his accusers, far from challenging the appeal and invoking the pope, flocked to the imperial court (*Epp.* ix, 24, 27). Gregory had one further channel through which he had hoped, early in his pontificate, to exert influence in Africa: the rector Hilarus, sent to take charge of the African possessions of the Roman church. But these hopes, too, were destined to be disappointed: in 591 Hilarus is peremptorily commanded to call a council in Numidia and to punish and rectify abuses (*Ep.* i, 82); in the following year Bishop Columbus is told to deal with irregularities at a council to be held under Hilarus's supervision (*Ep.* ii, 46); ten years later, however, the Numidian bishops have to be politely requested to invite Hilarus to their deliberations, 'if matters should so require' (*Epp.* xii, 8, 9). The change of Gregory's tone over the years needs no comment. He had come to accept the limits on the range of his influence which he could do nothing to remove.

<sup>1</sup> This is noted by E. Caspar, *Geschichte des Papsttums*, Tübingen 1933, II, 446. Caspar's summary of the real extent of papal influence in Africa can scarcely be improved on.

Donatism is not mentioned in Gregory's correspondence after 596. It would be quite unwarranted to infer from this that it had expired or was on the decline after this date. The evidence from the first five years of Gregory's pontificate, and from his relations with Africa during the remaining years, does not entitle us to suppose that his efforts could have had such spectacular success. It is very much more likely that the mingling of the two churches advanced unchecked towards something not far short of a complete fusion. An interesting indication of this process of fusion is contained in a formula preserved in the *Liber diurnus*. The instructions issued to newly consecrated bishops contain a prohibition of accepting Africans 'who dare to apply for admission to ecclesiastical orders, in any circumstances, for they frequently turn out to be Manichaeans or *rebaptizati* (i.e. Donatists).'<sup>1</sup> In Rome the distinction between Africans and Donatists was clearly a tenuous one; and it is more than likely that to Italian suspicions corresponded a state of affairs in the African Church such that the distinction between Catholic and Donatist was becoming increasingly unreal. Men who in Rome might be called 'Donatists' appear to have been quite acceptable in Africa in the ranks of the clergy and the episcopate; and, until such a man left Africa, no-one would think of enquiring whether he was a Catholic or a Donatist.

This *Liber Diurnus* formula can be traced back as far as Gelasius I (*Ep.* 15; PL, lix, 137). This suggests that the blending of the two communities in Africa had begun already during the period of Vandal rule. Little is known about the fate of Donatism during this period, but it seems very likely that Donatists and Catholics were

<sup>1</sup> *Synodale quem accipit episcopus*, no. 6 in the Vatican codex, pp. 80-81 in the edition by H. Foerster, Bern 1958. Cf. Gregory II's letter to Boniface, MGH, *Epp.* III, 267. I have not been able to consult L. Godard, 'Quels sont les Africains que le pape Grégoire II défendit en 723 d'élever au sacerdoce?' *Revue Africaine*, 1861, 48-53. Dr Frend (*op. cit.*, 313) is certainly right in interpreting the reference to the 'rebaptised' as meaning the Donatists. But we cannot conclude, as he does, that 'if this interpretation is true, then there is formal evidence for the survival of Donatism up to the very end of African Christianity.' The Lateran *scrinium* was not an institution noted for a zeal for innovation and change, least of all in Gregory II's time. If it could people the wilds of Thuringia with Roman municipal institutions (as it did in its mode of address), it would not be beyond its powers to fill Africa with Manichees and Donatists. The formula survived as late as the eleventh century (cf. Nicholas II, *Ep.* 25: PL, CXLIII, 1347). More evidence than the use of a fossilised convention is required to establish the survival of Donatism. The formula is already stereotyped by the time of Gregory I (cf. *Epp.* iii, 11; ix, 210) and was obviously a standard product of the papal *scrinium*.

### Donatism: the Last Phase

generally not distinguished by the Vandal rulers, and that the two churches were treated alike.<sup>1</sup> Under such conditions it is easy to conceive of their old divisions losing their sharpness. The rise of the Berber kingdoms in the later fifth and early sixth centuries may have promoted this process of merging. Some of their rulers were Christians<sup>2</sup>; and Christian exiles from the Vandal kingdom were active as missionaries among the Berbers of Numidia and Byzacena, particularly among those of the Hodna.<sup>3</sup> Numidia is the region in which the 'Donatist' revival of Gregory's time is concentrated. Of the trouble-spots mentioned in his correspondence only Lamiggiga can be definitely identified; but Bishop Columbus's see was almost certainly Nicivibus,<sup>4</sup> and both these places are in the heart of the area of the Berber kingdoms of the Hodna and the Aurès. It is difficult to resist the inference that the revival of 'Donatism' was related to the resurgence of these kingdoms. Since, however, our only hints of their Christianisation imply conversion by Catholic missionaries, the likelihood is strengthened that what Gregory knew as 'Donatism' was in fact a non-Roman, Berber Christianity.

How far we may generalise from the evidence I have surveyed here is not easy to decide. The narrow range of the literary records can in any case be extended only by archaeological evidence. But the literary evidence seems to me to be sufficient at least to prompt second thoughts about Dr Frend's judgement on the extent to which 'pope Gregory's arm reached into the farthest corners of Byzantine Numidia.'<sup>5</sup> There were clearly severe limits to its strength and to the effectiveness of its reach. The *Autonomiegefühl* of the African episcopate, of which Caspar speaks,<sup>6</sup> seems to me to be closely connected with the new relations between Catholics and Donatists which I have sketched. By the end of the sixth century the African Church had moved very far from the joyful acceptance of the set-up of the imperial *Reichskirche* which the council of Carthage had expressed in 535, welcoming the Byzantine reconquest. Within less

<sup>1</sup> Cf. P. Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne*, IV, Paris 1912, 97 f.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. J. Carcopino, 'Un "empereur" maure inconnu, d'après une inscription latine récemment découverte dans l'Aurès', *Revue des études anciennes*, (1944), 94-120.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. C. Courtois, *Les Vandales et l'Afrique*, Paris 1955, 338-9.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. H. Jaubert in *Rec. de Constantine*, (1912) 66-7, 141-4, quoted by Frend, *op. cit.*, 309-10.

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.* 314.

<sup>6</sup> E. Caspar, *Geschichte des Papsttums*, II, 446.

than a generation the African Church had taken the lead in resisting what it regarded as Justinian's attempt to meddle with Chalcedonian orthodoxy, and in denouncing the papacy in so far as it had lent itself to Justinian's purposes<sup>1</sup>. Its resistance could be crushed only by mobilising all the resources of repression that the empire could muster. The stand taken by the African Church on the underlying ecclesiological issues<sup>2</sup> led it to adopt its older stance of 'dissent' (to use Dr Frend's phrase). In this new climate of thought and feeling the gulf between Catholics and Donatists must have appeared less deep than it had been, say, in the first decade of the fifth century, and certainly very much less deep in the eyes of African churchmen than in those of the papacy. If my argument in this paper is right, it must incline us to revise the current views on the nature of Donatism and Catholicism in their later Byzantine phase in Africa. The alliance between African Catholicism and the empire will appear, in this new perspective, as little more than an episode in the tradition of the African Church.

<sup>1</sup> The resistance to the condemnation of the Three Chapters was geographically widespread, involving the provinces Proconsularis, Byzacena and Numidia. I owe this point to my pupil, Miss Susan Proudfoot.

<sup>2</sup> This is apparent from the remarkable study by W. Pewesin, 'Imperium, ecclesia universalis, Rom: der Kampf der afrikanischen Kirche um die Mitte des 6. Jahrhunderts', in *Geistige Grundlagen römischer Kirchenpolitik (Forsch. z. Kirchen- u. Geistesgeschichte, 11)*, Stuttgart 1937. Although Augustine had helped to cement the alliance between African Catholicism and the empire, the lineaments of a very different and, indeed, contrary view can also be discerned in his writings, above all in the *De civitate Dei*. How these divergent views were related in his mind and in his intellectual development is a question which still remains to be studied. Significantly, Augustine could be invoked in support of both sides in the course of the controversies during the schism of the Three Chapters.