

A Bishop and the Less Privileged in an African Diocese in the Late Roman Empire: Augustine at Hippo Regius

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Augustine¹ reached the highest levels of a classical education in Africa, first at Madauros (Mdaourouch) near his home town and then in the provincial capital of Carthage (nr. Tunis), before completing his studies in Rome itself, where he probably hoped to find a patron able to secure him a lucrative post in the civil service. But philosophy, and Christianity, intervened. A man of genius, he chose to spend his life in monastic retreat devoted to study and writing. However, he was ordained a priest against his will and, soon afterwards, bishop in a humdrum harbour town.

Before turning to his approach to his duties there his cultural background may be considered. It is now fashionable to designate him as an African. And, in fact, he himself described himself as an “Afer”

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 28th Biennial Conference of the Classical Association of South Africa in Pretoria in 2009. Standard abbreviations are used for classical and patristic works. For Augustine, see Pauly's *Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1893–1997), 2: 2363–67 [2] (= *RE*); *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1950–), 1: 981–93 (= *RAC*); and P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967).

(Latin for “African”).² This was in a letter to a *grammaticus* or high school teacher in Madauros, where, as mentioned, Augustine had himself gone to school. The *grammaticus*, a pagan, was scornful of the Punic names of some local Christian martyrs. But in turn Augustine reminded him of the Punic names of some of the gods worshipped in the town and then remarked that his correspondent’s tone was completely inappropriate for one African writing to another, as they both lived in Africa.³ However, this was not a reference to the continent, but to the Roman province (later known as Africa Proconsularis) which the Romans had formed from the territory confiscated from Carthage when they had destroyed the city in 146 BC: the name came from the *Afri* (pl. of *Afer*), a small people in the city’s hinterland. Augustine was by no means an “African” in the modern sense of the term. In these post-colonial times, the word carries heavy emotional baggage, especially for people in Europe and the descendants of Europeans who have settled on the continent. It implies a particular cultural and political stance.

Nor was a continental classification common in Antiquity: you were not addressed as an Asian if you lived in Syria and the Romans did not classify themselves as Europeans. In fact, you belonged to a city, like Athens or Milan, or a people, like the Batavians in Lower Germany or the Gaetulians

² Augustine has recently been called an Algerian (Thagaste is after all in modern Algeria). This was at a conference held on him in Algeria in 2001 which was sponsored by A. Boutiflika, the then President of the country. (Apparently he had received part of his education in a Roman Catholic seminary in Algeria, which may explain the attention he gave to Augustine.)

The term “Berber” for the local language of Algeria has recently aroused criticism: H. Ghazi-ben Maïssa regards it as unsuitable because it derives from the Latin *barbarus* with its pejorative connections. He would prefer the term Amazigh(e), comparing the Mashawash people, who were known as the Mazices in Antiquity (Afrom XVI [2006] 2089–2108). Nero had Mazican couriers in Rome (Suet. N. 30, 3).

³ ‘As an African person writing to Africans, since we are both situated in Africa’ (‘ut homo Afer scribens Afris, cum simus utrique in Africa constituti’, Epist. 17, 2). For Augustine’s conception of Africa, see C. Lepelley, ‘L’Afrique et sa diversité vues par saint Augustin’, in *Saint Augustin, la Numidie et la société de son temps*, ed. S. Lancel, Actes . . . Bordeaux 2003 (Pessac: Ausonius, 2005), pp. 29–42.

near the Sahara. What was important for the census was the local unit. At the Nativity of Christ, Joseph, though a resident of Nazareth, went to his ancestral village of Bethlehem to register (Lk 2: 1–5). In the census your *ciuitas* and *pagus* were what counted (Dig. L 15, 4). Augustine was born in an area inhabited by a people called Afri; his *civitas* was Thagaste (Souk Ahras),⁴ but his *pagus*, his suburb or ward, is not known. Thagaste was not a mere *uicus* or village nor a *castellum*, a fortified point in the countryside, but a proper urban community, a *municipium*. In the Roman world there was a hierarchy of communities (although by the 4th century the distinctions between them were beginning to wear thin). The most honourable were the *coloniae*, settlements of Roman citizens outside Rome itself, like Carthage, after it had been refounded by the Romans. *Municipia* were the second most important. They were existing communities whose members had been granted Roman citizenship. Thagaste fell into this category.

Can Augustine be placed socially? His father's name was Patricius, his own Augustinus and he had a brother called Navigius.⁵ These were called *cognomina* in Latin: they partly correspond to modern surnames. Navigius (from the Latin *nauis*) suggests a connection with shipping. Patricius recalls the patricians or nobles of Rome and Augustinus is derived from the imperial name of Augustus. Do these names imply social pretensions on the part of the family? Besides a cognomen a Roman had a *nomen* (perhaps a "clan" name). Augustine's was Aurelius. This *nomen* was very common from the early 3rd century onwards: it was that of the emperor Caracalla (who incidentally came from the African town of Lepcis Magna [Lebda] some 500 km east of Thagaste). In 212, by the *Constitutio Antoniniana*, he

⁴ For Thagaste, see *RE* 5A: 1183; C. Lepelley, *Les cités de l'Afrique romaine au Bas-Empire*, 2 vols (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1979–81), 2: 175–77.

⁵ For these names, see I. Kajanto, *The Latin Cognomina* (Helsinki: Helsingfors, 1965), pp. 313, 316, 347.

had extended Roman citizenship to all free inhabitants of the empire who had not yet been enfranchised. Many of the new citizens took his nomen of Aurelius. If Augustine's nomen goes back to a grant to an ancestor under this enactment it could imply that his family was of local stock and had only been enfranchised for a century and a half.

Augustine himself tells us that his family was poor:⁶ he described his father as a 'municeps Thagastensis admodum tenuis' (Conf. II 3, 5) who only owned a pitiable farm ('pauca agellula' – Epist. 126, 7). In fact, he needed the assistance of a wealthy neighbour to pay for his son's rhetorical (or "university") education in Carthage. But Patricius was of some importance in Thagaste: he was a member of the city council there. As such he belonged to the upper level of Roman society, the *honestiores*, who enjoyed greater legal and other privileges than the majority, the *humiliores*.⁷ To be a *curialis* or member of the city council involved expense. Perhaps the suggestion may be made that Patricius (and therefore Augustine) was lower middle class.⁸ However, this gave Augustine the potential to rise in the social scale should he receive a good education and make suitable contacts (which, of course, he did).

The question to be addressed is how the highly educated and brilliant philosopher and theologian that he became could respond to the less privileged in his diocese.⁹

⁶ Serm. 356, 13; for Augustine's family, see W.H.C. Frend, *Archaeology and History in the Study of Early Christianity* (London: Variorum, 1988), item VIII.

⁷ Possidius (*RE* 22: 860–61 [2]), Augustine's biographer, says that he was born 'de numero curialium parentibus honestis' (Vit. 1, 1). The *curia* was the city council (*RE* 4: 1819–21; Lepelley, *Les cités de l'Afrique romaine au Bas-Empire*, 1: 197–234). Possidius knew Augustine intimately: he had been a monk in his monastery at Hippo.

⁸ In one of his sermons (356, 13) Augustine went so far as to call himself a poor man of poor parents (this when refusing to wear a rich red cloak as bishop).

⁹ For Augustine's adoption of classical culture for Christian purposes, see H.-I. Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, EFRA 145 (Paris: de Boccard, 1938), esp. pp. 329–45.

The World of Augustine

The late Roman Empire had an extremely hierarchical social structure ranging from the emperor and the heads of the bureaucracy at the apex to the senatorial nobility, the governors of provinces and the urban authorities, down eventually to ordinary citizens and the slaves. The older Augustine became, the greater was his correspondence with the wealthy nobles, the governors and other officials in Africa. His language is always one of deep respect, which was of course the normal courtesy of the time, and he was not rebuffed. He also communicated with the nobility in other provinces and in Italy.

In church circles he could correspond with the most distinguished Christians of the day, like Ambrose, a prominent north Italian nobleman consecrated bishop of Milan by popular demand, and Jerome who, although leading the life of a recluse in Bethlehem, was the fourth century's chief biblical scholar.¹⁰ He was treated with respect by the primate of Africa in Carthage as well as the bishop of Rome (then on his way to becoming a pope).

But there were also powerful people outside the empire to be taken into account; the Germanic Vandals would be battering the walls of Hippo Regius as Augustine lay dying there. Those beyond the frontiers were usually called barbarians,¹¹ but it should be noted that the term has far less of the sense of the modern "barbaric": "foreigners" is perhaps a better equivalent for *barbari*. Barbari were not all that remote: many were serving in the Roman army, like the man who stated on his tombstone that he was

¹⁰ For Ambrose, see *RE* 1: 1812 [7]–15 and *RAC* 1: 365–73 ff.; for Jerome, see *RE* 8: 1565 [16] ff. and *RAC* 15: 117–39.

¹¹ See W. Speyer *et al.*, 'Barbar (Nachträge zum RAC)', *JbAC* x (1967): 251–90 (p. 276), Y.A. Dauge, *Le Barbare: recherches sur la conception romaine de la barbarie et de la civilisation* (Brussels: Latomus, 1981), pp. 307ff., and H. Diesner, 'Augustinus und die Barbaren der Völkerwanderung', *REAug* xxiii (1977): 83–91.

a 'Frank, a Roman citizen, a soldier in arms' (ILS 2814). And many had been given abandoned land to settle. Such were the *limitanei*, the men from the area of the *limes* or the frontier.¹²

The barbari were close in Africa, on the fringes of the Sahara and in the Aurès Mountains to the south. Augustine himself referred to the countless barbarian tribes ('barbarae innumerabiles gentes') there who had not heard the Gospel (Epist. 199, 46). They were, however, involved in the provincial economy. Augustine received a letter from a local person saying that when they were employed to escort baggage or guard harvests in the province they swore by their native pagan gods. The question was: did the acceptance of such an oath defile a Christian who employed them?¹³ In fact, the "barbarian" question was full of ambiguities. Augustine pointed out that although the barbari sacked Rome (this is a reference to the Goths in 410) they spared those who had taken refuge in the shrines of the martyrs and the basilicas of the apostles.¹⁴ The fact was that these barbari themselves had become Christians, if only Arians. But Augustine was not without concern for them. For example, he referred to the benign influence exercised on them by three nuns whom they had captured (Epist. 111, 7). He also referred to barbarians who had settled in the Roman empire and been Christianized, together with their *praefecti* or chiefs (Epist. 111, 9).

¹² For the *limitanei*, see B.H. Warmington, *The North African Provinces from Diocletian to the Vandal Conquest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954), p. 24. For an earlier example, cf. the decorated veteran C. Julius Gaetulus (ILAlg 137 = AE 2005, 1692) buried in a village near Hippo. His name is good Latin, although his cognomen of Gaetulus might give pause: it was not the more respectable *Gaetulicus*: on these cognomina, see J. Gascou, *MEFRA* lxxxii (1970): 723–36. But the second half of his epitaph is in the local Libyan language, not the respectable Punic of the area. See A. Rebuffat, 'Le vétéran gétule de Thullium', in *Identités et cultures dans l'Algérie antique*, ed. C. Briand-Poinsart (Rouen: Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2005), pp. 193–233.

¹³ Epist. 46. The correspondent also wished to know if it was justifiable to kill a barbarian, who attacked one, in self-defence. Augustine's reply to the first question was that, if the barbarian acted in good faith according to his oath, he could be employed (Epist. 47).

¹⁴ CivDei I 1. Cf. Jerome, Epist. 27, 13. Orosius (VII 39) names the basilicas as those of Peter and Paul. Augustine also referred to this in a sermon on the sack of Rome (UrbExc 2, 2).

The People of Hippo Regius

Naturally Augustine met people of lesser degree of all types in his diocese of Hippo Regius (now Annaba in Algeria).¹⁵ The city had been founded by the Phoenicians from the Levant (from modern Lebanon) in the 4th century BC. It had come under Roman control in the 2nd century BC. Augustus, the first Roman emperor, raised it to the status of a municipium in the 1st century AD. A century later it became a colonia, hence of higher status than Thagaste. As such it exhibited all the features of a typical Roman town with its emphasis on class and wealth and its lavish public entertainments in the theatre, the amphitheatre and the public baths.¹⁶

The upper class would have consisted of wealthy descendants of the Punic founders and of the Italian settlers, many of whom may have married women from local families. The artisans and traders would have been equally Punic and Roman. Some peasants from the city's agricultural hinterland and even from the mountains to the south would also have migrated to the city. The harbour area would have attracted men from all over the Mediterranean, some of whom would have settled in the city: for example, Augustine mentions Greeks and a Syrian (CivDei XXII 8).

As far as religion is concerned, the city had undergone considerable Christianization by the time of Augustine, but the Christians were split into two antagonistic denominations, the orthodox or catholic community, which Augustine headed, and the Donatists, who had their own bishop.

¹⁵ For Hippo Regius, see *RE* 8: 2627–28, *RAC* 15: 442–66, Lepelley, *Les cités de l'Afrique romaine au Bas-Empire*, 2: 113–23, and S. Lancel, 'Études sur la Numidie d'Hippone au temps de saint Augustin', *MEFRA* xcvi (1984): 1085–113.

¹⁶ Cf. Augustine's wry comment on an amphitheatre in a nearby town which was falling into ruin. He said that it had been built by the extravagance of godless men and that one should in fact be glad that such an edifice should collapse but that what piety builds should rise (Serm. 113A, 13). His point was that excess wealth should not be lavished on works of display but in support for the poor.

Donatism was a local African movement which Augustine opposed by every means at his disposal.¹⁷ But paganism was still much in evidence.

The Linguistic Situation¹⁸

The indigenous language of north Africa belongs to the Afro-Asiatic group. Modern scholars usually refer to it as Libyan.¹⁹ Eventually it evolved into modern Berber.²⁰

The cultural language in the area was Punic:²¹ Augustine (Epist. 17, 2) referred to books of wisdom written in it. It had been introduced by the Phoenicians, but remained a major language even after the Roman conquest and the consequent increasing use of Latin. As late as the 2nd century AD there was a local nobleman whose sole language it was (Apul. Apol. 98) and when, early in the 3rd century, Septimius Severus (the father of Caracalla, mentioned above) from Lepcis Magna became emperor, his Latin is said to have retained African traces and he is alleged to have sent his sister away from Rome because she could scarcely speak Latin (SHA Sev. 19; 15). It is of interest that the first African to become bishop of Rome, Victor (*RE* 8A: 2068 [66]), served in the time of Septimius Severus.

¹⁷ For the Donatists (and Circumcellions), see *RE* 5: 1540–42, *RAC* 4: 127–47; W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952); *idem*, 'Circumcellions and Monks', *JThS* xxx (1969): 542–49; *idem*, *Archaeology and History in the Study of Early Christianity* (London: Variorum 1988), item XV; and Warmington, *The North African Provinces*, pp. 76–102.

¹⁸ For the languages of Christian north Africa, see G. Bardy, *La question des langues dans l'Église ancienne* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1948), pp. 52–72.

¹⁹ For Libyan, see O. Rössler, 'Die Numider – Herkunft, Schrift, Sprache', in *Die Numider*, ed. H.G. Horn *et al.* (Cologne: Rheinland, 1979), pp. 95–97, and J.N. Adams, *Bilingualism and the Latin Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 245–47.

²⁰ For objection to the term Berber, see above, n. 2.

²¹ For Punic, see W. Röellig, 'Das Punische im röm. Reich', in *Die Sprachen im Römischen Reich der Kaiserzeit*, Bjb. Suppl. xl, ed. G. Neumann *et al.* (Cologne: Rheinland, 1980), pp. 95ff., and Adams, *op. cit.*, pp. 200ff. For Augustine's attitude to it, see C. Lepellety, 'Temoignages de saint Augustin sur l'ampleur et les limites de la usage de la langue punique dans l'Afrique de sontemps', in *Identités et cultures dans L'Algerie antique*, ed. Briand-Poinsart, pp. 127–53.

Greek, the language of the eastern half of the empire, was only spoken by a minority in north Africa.

Latin was the language of administration at both provincial and city level. It was also the medium of education and literature. As a former professor of rhetoric Augustine could use it at its most refined.²² But although he continued to write his major treatises, like *The City of God*, in an elevated style, the *sermo sublimis*, for much of his correspondence and preaching he used the *sermo humilis*,²³ a simpler style.

There were of course many registers of Latin. Popular and uneducated forms appear on ordinary tombstones. The Latin of the Bible seemed “better” to many Africans than that of the school classics (DoctChr. II 14, 21). A typical example of it appears in the transcript of a case involving a man from Abthugni (Henchir-es-Sonar) who, although a duovir or mayor of that town, was hardly grammatical (the Acta Felicis).

Augustine’s Approach to the Linguistic Diversity of his Diocese

Augustine was deeply interested in linguistic theory and the role of language in human understanding. He once remarked that if the people of Hippo were Greek he would have had to preach in that language.²⁴ He noticed that many had difficulty in reading theological tracts. Accordingly, to counter Donatism, he wrote a “small book” (*libellus*), which is not extant, on the heresy which was easy to copy and so could reach many and could even be memorized because it was so brief (Retr. II 29, 56). As noted above, he used a simpler Latin when preaching than when writing formally.

²² For Augustine’s various styles, see E. Norden, *Die antike Kunstprosa* (Berlin, 1898), pp. 621–24 and 948–49.

²³ For the *sermo humilis*, see R. MacMullen, ‘A Note on *Sermo Humilis*’, *JThS* xvii (1966): 108–112. Cf. Augustine’s phrase ‘simplex fides’ (Serm. 105, 3) for the faith of the theologically unsophisticated.

²⁴ Serm. 225, 3. It is ironic that Augustine was ordained a priest to preach on behalf of his predecessor as bishop, Valerius (*RE* 7A: 2300–01 [32]), who was a Greek unable to communicate in Latin.

As far as Punic is concerned, he nowhere says that he spoke it. He tells of his mother Monica²⁵ – her name is Punic – holding long conversations with her servants (Conf. IX 8, 17–18). Surely those were in Punic and her intelligent son would naturally have wanted to have understood. He tells us that he enjoyed birding in the countryside (QuantAnim 21, 36). Surely he met the local boys there and would have spoken to them (and that not in Latin). He mentions a discussion that he had with his son Adeodatus – the name is a theophoric one typical of north Africa²⁶ – on the precise meaning of a Punic phrase. There seems no reason to deny Augustine a knowledge of Punic, even if he was not fluent in it.

Augustine promoted the use of Punic whenever it seemed appropriate.²⁷ It was needed especially in countryside churches: he refused to release a Punic speaking deacon to another diocese because he needed him in his own (Epist. 84, 2). At some stage he felt the small castellum of Fussula some 60 km east of Hippo should be elevated into a bishopric, but that the bishop had to be Punic speaking. The person chosen pulled out at the last minute and in desperation Augustine appointed a young lector in his place (which was contrary to current canon law). The person he chose had been virtually destitute when Augustine took him into his monastery at Hippo. Unfortunately the choice was disastrous: not only was the new bishop completely unsuitable, but he engaged in criminal activities against his own flock. When he was eventually put on trial the primate of Africa spoke in Punic.²⁸

At one point in his struggle against Donatism Augustine suggested that the local Donatist bishop and he should hold a public debate on the matter. This, he said, should be in Latin, but that it should both be

²⁵ See *RE* Suppl. 6: 520–29.

²⁶ Kajanto, *The Latin Cognomina*, p. 216.

²⁷ In the city itself, however, not everyone in his congregation knew Punic (Serm. 167, 4).

²⁸ Aug. Epist. 209. For a detailed analysis of the case, see Frend, *Archaeology and History in the Study of Early Christianity*, item X.

translated into Punic and duly recorded in that language for the benefit of the locals (Epist. 66, 2).

However, in his own preaching he made little use of Punic.²⁹ His main use of it was to explain Hebrew terms in the Bible like *mammon* (Serm. 113, 2): Punic and Hebrew were closely related Semitic languages. In passing, it may be noted that Augustine took care to explain Greek technical terms like *epiphaneia* (Serm. 202, 1) or *eleemosyne* (Serm. 207, 1) by translating them – but into Latin, not Punic.

Augustine was aware of Libyan: in *The City of God* (XVI 6) he refers to several African barbarian tribes (*gentes*) all using the same language. But there is no concession at all to the indigenous language in his preaching.³⁰ Difficulty has been caused by a remark of his that the Donatists used various languages, ‘Latina et Punica, id est Afra’ (Ep. Ioh. ad Parthos II 3). *Afra* has been taken as a reference to Libyan, but the context makes it clear that the Donatists used only two languages. *Afra* here refers not to a third language, but to Punic as contrasted with Latin.³¹

Homiletical Theory

For Augustine’s theory of preaching we have his work *De Catechizandis Rudibus* (‘On Christian Training for Those New to the Faith’). The church designated those as *rudes* who were not necessarily uneducated but who

²⁹ Not everyone in his congregations understood Punic: on one occasion he translated a Punic proverb into Latin for them (Serm. 167, 4).

³⁰ For traces of Libyan culture around Thagaste, see Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 230. Even a Donatist bishop could not speak the language of a mob he was leading into Hippo (Epist. 108, 5; 14).

³¹ This is the view of M. Simon, ‘Punique ou Berbère? Note sur la situation linguistique dans l’Afrique Romaine’, in *Melanges Isidore Levy*, Annuaire de phil. et hist. d’orient. xiii 1953 (Brussels: Secrétariat des éditions de l’Institut, 1955), pp. 613–29. See also the detailed discussion in W.M. Green, ‘Augustine’s Use of Punic’, in *Semitic and Oriental Studies Presented to W. Popper* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1951), pp. 179–90.

were as yet uninformed about the teachings of Christianity. The work was written at the request of a priest in Carthage in charge of catechizing there who wanted advice on how to make his teaching more interesting for the new converts.³² Augustine chose a hypothetical catechumen, an *idiotes*, i.e., someone uninformed about the matter in hand: he might have read some works by Christian writers but was essentially ‘rudis et indoctus’, as yet uninstructed in Christian tenets. He was also “unlearned”: he had not had a full classical education, not having been ‘liberalibus doctrinis excultus’ (CatRud 8, 12). This is a clear indication of how carefully Augustine adapted his preaching to the educational level of his audience.³³

Augustine laid great stress on psychological factors in preaching situations. The attitude of the catechizer was all important. Even if he had performed the task frequently in the past, he must not show boredom, but exhibit *hilaritas* or positive cheerfulness (CatRud 10, 14). He must have a sympathetic disposition and feel brotherly affinity with those being instructed. He must be responsive to the mood of his audience and be able to adjust his discourse in response. Augustine tells how, when he was once instructing a man “from the country”, he became aware that he was showing signs of physical distress: accordingly he provided him with a seat (CatRud 13, 19). Audiences usually stood before a bishop who preached seated.

As always in his choice of material Augustine stuck close to the Bible. His catechesis was essentially an exegesis of the Old and the New Testaments. For explaining difficult passages in the former he advocated having recourse to allegory or typology (CatRud 20, 36; 26, 50). The Biblical exposition was followed by a succinct account of major Christian doctrines.

³² The fullest commentary is that of J.P. Christopher (trans.), *De Catechizandis Rudibus Liber Unus* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1926). There is a briefer edition: *Le magistère chrétien*, by G. Combès and J. Farges (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer 1949). On catechizing in the 4th century, see my article, ‘The Educational Effect of Catechetical Instruction in the Fourth Century A.D.’, *Euphrosyne* v (1972): 249–71.

³³ The audience might be uneducated or educated, citizens or foreigners, urban or rural, and from any order of society (CatRud. 12, 17 to 13, 19; 15, 23).

Augustine's Own Preaching

How did Augustine's own sermons address the needs of the less cultured in his congregations? A famous sermon, one on the Destruction of Rome (the *De Excidio Romae*), delivered soon after the sack of the city by invading Goths in 410, may be chosen as an example.³⁴

Augustine started (UrbExc 1, 1) by moralizing on Daniel confessing his sins, the subject of one of the day's Bible readings (Dan. 9: 20): he repeated this theme several times during the sermon. But he gave greater attention to another passage in the Bible, that of Abraham pleading with God to save Sodom even if only a small number of just men could be produced in the city (Gen. 18: 32). Abraham had first hoped to find fifty such men (Gen. 18: 24) and apparently people were arguing that God should have saved Rome because there were more than fifty just Christians there (UrbExc 2, 2). But in the end Augustine gives a paradoxical answer to the popular position: God had in fact saved Rome: he did not destroy it like Sodom. Those killed by the Goths were actually "freed" by the grace of God (UrbExc 5, 5) – for heaven. The suffering of Rome was small compared with that to be endured by those who would go to Hell. God's punishment of Rome was mild compared with what faced the evil after death: he was "chastising" his people. God was only disciplining (not destroying) Rome to bring the Romans to their senses. It was an act of mercy, not punishment, to do this for their own eternal good. Rome was amended rather than destroyed like Sodom (UrbExc 7, 8ff.). There are worse things than temporal evils (UrbExc 8, 9). In other words, he turned the popular argument on its head.

³⁴ There is a separate edition of and commentary on the *De Excidio Urbis Romae* by M.V. O'Reilly (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1955). For his other sermons on this subject, see T.S. de Bruyn, 'Augustine's Sermons on the Sack of Rome', *JECs* i (1993): 405–21.

He was, of course, not insensitive to the suffering that had occurred: he, too, had wept at the news of the tragedy,³⁵ and he appealed for the congregation's love (*caritas* – UrbExc 3,3). And, as noted above, he stated that the Goths had actually spared those who had taken refuge in Christian sanctuaries in the city (UrbExc 2, 2).

Although responsive to his congregation's concerns and sympathetic to them, he managed to put the event in what was, to him, its correct theological perspective. Rather than question the faithfulness of God, people should care for the hungry and homeless – did these include the refugees from Rome? – hovering around the door of the church in winter (cf. Sermon. 25, 8). Augustine did not compromise on what he felt was the correct interpretation to be put on the disaster. In a long comparison (UrbExc 6, 7) he described a natural disaster which had recently struck Constantinople (the "Rome" of the East, now Istanbul). The people had made the correct response to it: they had prayed to God and rejoiced in Him when restored to their homes. (In passing it may be noted that he actualized the incident by saying that it was perhaps known to many in the congregation at Hippo.) For him the prime object was to bring people to a right conception of how God acts. To do this he used two main tools, simple exposition of Biblical texts and the patient correction of popular misconceptions, but in as sympathetic a manner as possible: in an earlier sermon he referred to his hearers as *contirones mei*, 'my fellow beginners in the faith'.³⁶ As he remarked himself, the gentle approach was the best: teaching rather than commanding, warning rather than threatening (Epist. 22, 5).

³⁵ UrbExc 2, 3. Cf. Sermon. 105, 12. As O'Reilly, o.c.n. 34, 82, points out, Augustine's words for the cruelty of the Goths, *interfectiones* and *excruciationes*, are very rare forms and surely point to his emotion.

³⁶ Sermon. 216, 2. *Contiro* originally meant a fellow recruit in the army, but was currently taking on the meaning of fellow catechumen.

In general, it may be concluded that Augustine took the needs of the less cultured members of his congregation extremely seriously.³⁷ He preached to them in faultless Latin,³⁸ but in a simple, almost paratactic style that would be easily comprehensible by the uneducated. He restricted himself to a comparatively limited range of vocabulary. His sentences were often very rhythmical, which facilitated memory. He frequently posed brief rhetorical questions, a clever tactic to involve his hearers in his train of thought and keep them alert. He was adept at playing on words to good effect.

A constant technique, especially when a difficult passage in the Old Testament was being handled, was a resort to allegory. For example, he interpreted the Crossing of the Red Sea by the ancient Israelites when they emigrated from Egypt (Exod. 14; Aug. Sermon 213, 8) as an approach to the baptismal font. The Sea was Red: this referred to the blood of Christ which had cleansed the Christian believer. The Egyptians became the Christian's sins: they followed him only as far as the Red Sea, i.e., to his baptism. Once, when referring to a verse in a psalm, 'As a hind longs for the running streams, so long I for you, my God',³⁹ he explained the verse but then, stretching the analogy, told the congregation that deer usually crossed streams in single file, each resting his head on the back of the one in front. They also often changed the leader at the head of the column to give him a rest. In this way, Augustine said, Christians should bear each other's burdens (a reference to Gal. 6: 2). In all his preaching he created an impression of spontaneity (cf. Possid. Vit. 7) and, as noted, preached in a spirit of human warmth and fellow feeling.

³⁷ For Augustine's preaching techniques, see C. Mohrmann, *Sint Augustinus – Preken voor het Volk* (Utrecht: Het Spectrum, 1948), pp. xlii–vii.

³⁸ See Marrou, *St. Augustin et la fin de la culture antique*, p. 78. On Augustine's adoption of the simple style, see S.M. Oberhelman, *Rhetoric and Homiletics in Fourth-Century Christian Literature*, *American Classical Studies* 26 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), pp. 109–11.

³⁹ En. in Ps. 41: 4 (i.e. Ps. 42: 1 in modern numbering).

But he did not talk down to his audience: he could refer to Cicero and Virgil (Serm. 167, 6; 241, 4). He would even discuss some of his own philosophical thinking. As already observed, he was deeply interested in the nature of language. In one sermon (237, 4) he tried to explain how human communication worked, but frankly admitted that he did not know the full answer. Preaching was to be taken seriously, and was a worthy art: it was in fact superior to the effusions of pagan rhetoric. He maintained that any orator who could give a good explanation of what fishermen wrote would be considered great (Serm. 250, 1: “fisherman”, of course, refers to a writer of a Gospel).

But the most important function of preaching remained instruction. He often gave the title *Magister* to Christ:⁴⁰ he was the Teacher par excellence. Augustine’s perennial concern was for purity of doctrine and correct behaviour.

Basically he used preaching to interpret the Bible. This the people of the time knew well, so that in a sense he was dealing with the familiar. He did not compromise on what he regarded as essential and used his rhetorical skill solely to make his message intelligible and attractive. There would always have been those in the congregation who would not have understood fully, but one must not forget non-verbal factors in communication. The less well educated would be drawn by the communal spirit created by a service of worship and would readily respond to Augustine’s personality and expressions. In missionary churches business has for centuries been conducted in imported languages only partially understood by the congregation. Apparently what counts as an important component of congregational assimilation of religion is the spirit in which it is communicated.

⁴⁰ Serm. 279, 9; cf. ‘caelestis magister’ (Serm. 105, 1). We are *condiscipuli* of the one *magister* (Epist. 192, 2). Christ’s school is life on earth: in it we are *condiscipuli* (En. in Ps. 34 Serm. 1, 1).

Non-Catholic Christians

Did Augustine's concern extend to those who did not belong to the same denomination as he? The main such group with which he had to deal was the Donatists.⁴¹ But for most of his life they were not a minority movement: at times it even seemed as though they might replace Catholicism as the largest church in north Africa. The contest between the two denominations became increasingly bitter and eventually both sides appealed to the State to intervene.

Augustine's initial approach was conciliatory:⁴² he tried to win Donatists over by persuasion and public debate on equal terms (Epist. 23): he specifically abjured the use of force (Epist. 23, 7; 93, 17f.). But the situation deteriorated and was complicated by the actions of the Circumcellions.⁴³ These were adherents of Donatism resident in the countryside. However, they were not settled agricultural workers but itinerants.⁴⁴ Augustine said that they did no work, but dwelt round martyrs' shrines (*cellae*) because of the food they could get at them.⁴⁵ However, their religious exclusivity led to violent attempts to change society about them. In one of his letters (Epist. 111, 1) Augustine complained that they were more violent than the barbarians. In particular, they attempted to get debts cancelled by violence and subverted the social order by capturing rich landowners and forcing them to perform the functions of their own slaves.

⁴¹ For whom, see above, n. 17.

⁴² See Ep. 23, 7; 61, 2; Possid. Vit. 9, 1.

⁴³ *RE* 3: 2570; M. Overbeck, 'Augustin und die Circumcelliones Seiner Zeit', *Chiron* 3 (1973): 457–63.

⁴⁴ Transhumance and nomadism had always been a prominent feature of north African life: Pliny the Elder describes "Numidians" who travelled from pasturage to pasturage with their *mapalia* or collapsible huts on their wagons. See Plin. NH V 22 with J. Desanges *ad loc.* Cf. Sall. BJ 18, 7f.

⁴⁵ Aug. C. Gaud. I 28, 32; cf. Epist. 88, 8. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 173 and 'Circumcellions and Monks', has pointed out that there were granaries at the shrines, and explains the origin of the name of the group to their going about the cellae. For the Berber custom of meeting at tombs, see E. Fentress, 'Romanising the Berbers', *Past and Present* 190 (2006): 3–33, p.17.

Augustine became increasingly pessimistic about winning the Donatists over, though in his eyes it was absolutely vital for their own sakes that they be reclaimed from fatal (doctrinal) error and be brought back to the true fold: otherwise they would face eternal damnation. Accordingly, to the horror of moderns, he was prepared to use the *compelle entrare* approach found in a parable in the New Testament (Lk. 14: 23). However, it should be noted that the parable does not necessarily imply that actual physical force was to be applied to bring guests to the wedding feast: the *anagkason* of the original may not mean more than “urge strongly”. Augustine had become convinced that it was in the best interests of the Donatists that they be converted to the truth even by the application of physical force by the secular authorities.⁴⁶ It should be recalled of course that ancient (slave-owning) societies were much more violent than modern liberal democracies: Roman centurions (or army captains), for example, carried staffs of office with which to beat the men under their command as a form of discipline even although they were fellow citizens. And it should be noted that Augustine pleaded for restraint in the application of force: the authorities should not go beyond beatings with rods (Epist. 133, 2). In the *Retractions* (II 5) he used the mild term *disciplina* rather than “force” for this.⁴⁷ Augustine’s concern for the weak did not extend to the heretic, except in a fashion condemned in modern times.

Social and Economic Concerns

Augustine’s prime emphasis was doctrine. But he did not ignore social problems, like the caricature of the wealthy divine in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels whose sole role was to participate in the life-

⁴⁶ Aug. Epist 58. For laws passed, see CTh XVI, 5, 52. For violence by landowners against their *coloni* of other denominations, see Ep. 66; see also Lepelley, *Les cités de l’Afrique romaine au Bas-Empire*, 1: 326–330.

⁴⁷ For Augustine’s attitude on the use of force against citizens in general, see J. Harries, *Law and Empire in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 132–34.

style of his fellow noblemen. But of course Augustine had no programme of social reform such as that which became popular in Christian socialist circles in the last century. He accepted society as it was.

The social situation was deteriorating rapidly: as noted, the Circumcellions attempted to right various wrongs. The main problems were lawlessness, heavy taxation and increasing debt. Some coloni or agricultural workers were so desperate that they were even prepared to sell their children into slavery. Marauding slave traders even carried off vulnerable free persons.⁴⁸

Basically he had two approaches to the misery of the poorer classes of his day. He adopted a simple lifestyle for himself in the monastic community he attached to his cathedral in Hippo (as described by Possid. Vit. 22, 5). There, too, he had to be content with the company of fellow Christians who were far less intellectual than he was, sometimes even poorly educated. He said of one of his junior associates, Possidius (his future biographer), that he had been fed, not on the liberal arts, but on the Lord's bread (Epist. 101, 1).

The estate he inherited on the death of his father he sold and distributed the proceeds to the poor (Epist. 126, 7).

He was prepared to intervene for the underprivileged in cases of gross injustice (e.g., Epist. 108, 8) and visited people in jail. He put the poor on a high pedestal.⁴⁹ He once remarked that Jesus did not begin with generals and orators, but fishermen (Serm. 252, 1). Rich men were constantly reminded that they were in fact beggars before God. His peculiar, and constant, message was that surplus wealth should not be hoarded or lavished

⁴⁸ Epist. 10* 2ff. (Divjak); cf. Frend, *Archaeology and History in the Study of Early Christianity*, item IX, pp. 497–512.

⁴⁹ Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, pp. 195ff.; cf. *idem*, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover, NH: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 63ff., Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 329, and R. Finn in *Poverty in the Roman World*, ed. M. Atkins *et al.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 130–44.

on conspicuous expenditure (cf. En. in Ps. 147, 13) – he particularly criticized lavish spending on entertainments in the theatre or amphitheatre – but be used to relieve the poor and the indigent. In fact, he went further and stressed that almsgiving, or charity as it is called today, was at the heart of a Christian's expression of his love for God. It was not an optional extra, but a vital component of his faith.

Both in his homiletical and in his social thinking, therefore, Augustine gave enormous attention to the less privileged and the less fortunate in his diocese.