Class Summary – Donatism

What is Donatism?

Donatism is the schismatic heresy which holds that the Church must remain “holy” according to Donatists rather than Catholic standards, and that sacraments conferred by those deemed to be “unholy” are invalid. It arose in North Africa in the early 4th century and is named after Donatus, a Bishop whom the Donatists supported in opposition to Caecilian, whose consecration as a Bishop they objected to because his consecrator, Felix of Aptunga, had been a *traditor* (one who handed over Church property) during the persecution of Christians conducted under the Roman Emperor Diocletian (284-305 AD). They were opposed chiefly by St. Augustine of Hippo, who maintained that the unworthiness of the minister does not affect the validity of the sacraments, since their true minister is Christ. The Donatists were condemned by the Synod of Arles in 314 AD.

Donatism is technically, perhaps, a schism rather than a heresy, because of the division it caused in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church was not primarily doctrinal. Our ecclesiology tells us that whereas heresy is opposed by faith, schism is opposed to love, and St. Irenaeus in his masterpiece, Against Heresies, lends his authority to the distinction when he refers to the lovelessness of schismatics.

The Christians in North Africa at the time, as elsewhere in the Roman Empire, were living in the aftermath of terrible persecution – The Great Persecution carried out under the pagan emperor Diocletian, who declared himself a demigod and didn’t like rivals. The martyrs were revered as heroes by many Christians in North Africa, and those who survived imprisonment and torture were honored with the title “Confessor”. But some clergy had capitulated, complying with instructions from the persecutors and handed over church property. They were called *traditores*, or “hander-over’s”.

In his book Augustine (Oxford Press, 1986), the Church historian Henry Chadwick describes how in the 4th century, as now, there were hawks and doves in most spheres of public life and the Church was no exception. The Christian hawks had never been keen on cooperating with secular authority; they expected the end of the world soon in any case, and saw themselves as “safeguarding the authentic holiness and ritual purity of God’s Temple, the Church” until his coming – at whatever the cost, and without fear of confrontation and reprisals. They wanted nothing more to do with the hander-over’s, the *traditores*. The doves, meanwhile, “wanted no confrontations, but only to live quiet lives of modest virtue” and ordered faithfulness. They were prepared to let the *traditores* return to ministry and carry on.

In 311 AD, a big church vacancy came up in North Africa: the Bishop of Carthage died, and his post needed to be filled. The doves moved fast and gathered three bishops to consecrate the archdeacon as his successor. But it was widely believed that the principal consecrator was one of the bishops who 8 years before had surrendered church property to the confiscating authorities, i.e. he was a *traditor*. As a consequence, the hawks would not recognize the consecration as valid, and immediately consecrated a rival bishop. After some “uneasy negotiations”, the rival bishop (the hawks’ bishop, whose name was Majorinus) was refused recognition by the churches north of the Mediterranean, including Rome, and by the new Emperor, Constantine the Great. He was not acknowledged as the “catholic” bishop – the one in communion with the Church Universal.

This strengthened further the hawks’ sense that they represented and authentic and indigenous African Christianity that was being unjustly put upon by alien forces that had no rightful claim on them – one of those forces being state power with which for good reasons of recent memory (persecutions) they wanted no part of.

The core theological issue at the heart of it all was this: they refused to acknowledge the validity of catholic sacraments of any kind, not baptism, not the Eucharist, not ordination – nothing – because of what certain bishops were meant to have done under the persecutions in previous years. They thought the Catholic Church had become polluted by the actions of those bishops. They thought that bishops and priests who had erred, or acted sinfully – the hander-over’s above all – could not from that point onwards have functioned in any meaningful way in the true Church.

The problem was that their practice betrayed two things at the heart of Christian teaching: the ineradicable fallibility of creation and its consequently unavoidable need of grace on this side of the end of time. It is God’s job to make the Church pure, not ours, and He will do it when He is ready. However morally zealous we are, we will never by our own effort carve out a pure space which we can call the true Church by pointing to the faultless lives of its members. Instead, they will sin, and they will need to be forgiven, and they will do so constantly. What makes the Church holy is that it is a place where the granting of forgiveness goes on all the time; it is not because forgiveness is never necessary in the first place. A Church which insisted that its members – or even just its clergy – has to be spotless would be an empty Church, or else a dishonest Church.

We may not like *traditores*, and there may even be sins for which we need to excommunicate them and people like them, but we cannot say that the baptisms they have administered and the Eucharist’s they have confected and the ordinations they have performed are null and void, and that all who have dealings with them automatically place *themselves* outside the Church too. Paradoxically, even being schismatic has never for the Catholic Church entailed the loss of orders.

The great result for the Christian Church of defeating Donatism was that it could establish the following principle – in practice and in teaching – the grace of God in the sacraments, does not depend for its effectiveness, on the personal sanctity of the individual minister, but on whether in the sacramental actions the minister does what God commands to be done in both matter and form. Ultimately, the sacraments belong to Christ, they’re not the minister’s personal property, and salvation is always and throughout the work of God, not of man.