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**St. Augustine and his Donatist Protagonists: The long legacy of cultural and religious tensions in the Christian Church of Numidia**

Ancient Numidia is part of the modern state of Algeria where enduring questions of self-identity profoundly mark the tensions in society. These tensions are part of a long legacy that can be traced back to the tensions the Christian Church faced in the fourth and early fifth century. A geographical and historical survey of Augustine's Donatist protagonists illustrates just how widespread Donatism and questions of religious self-identity were one thousand six hundred years ago. Today, Algeria is a rapidly changing society, vastly different from the Algeria of even ten years ago. As access to information has increased in that country, calls for a re-appropriation of identity have intensified. Identity is a challenge today just as religious identity was a challenge in Late Antiquity for both Augustine and the Donatists.

Sixteen hundred years ago North African religious identity manifested itself in Donatism. In most of the areas that were connected by Roman roads in today's Algeria, Tunisia and Libya there was a Catholic and its rival Donatist Church. These Donatists often clashed violently with the state-supported Catholics. As the Donatist armed wing (Circumcellions) emerged and began to terrorize the countryside; landowners and estates, debt collectors, Catholic laity and clergy were at all risk. This irked Rome – the Mauretania, Numidia and Proconsular Africa were Rome's granaries.

In 411/412, the ruling against the Donatists, in Augustine's presence, at the Conference of Carthage resulted in severe sanctions (backed by Imperial decree) against the Donatists. The severity of the sanctions imposed on the Donatists are well documented in the Theodosian Code. In retrospect, the Conference greatly divided North Africa and the Latin West. Christianity (albeit North African Christianity) was weakened to such a point as to make any effective resistance against the Vandals and Islam near impossible. The Conference of Carthage was a disaster. Unity was not achieved: quite the opposite, division was sowed. The Conference of Carthage, where hundreds of Catholic and Donatist bishops from all the African provinces faced each other is a major marker in history. Dialogue never took place; neither the framework nor the mechanisms were in place. The Donatist felt (and rightly so) that they were not going to get fair arbitration. It was more of an official condemnation than an attempt to reconcile. The Donatist bishops walked into the conference as bishops representing their communities and an African tradition of Christianity influenced greatly by the writings of Cyprian, with its own particularities— good organization and a conciliary tradition; veneration of local saints and martyrs, architecture, liturgy, processions etc. They walked out of the Conference of Carthage soon to be stripped of their titles, Churches and purses. No greater harm was done to African Christianity than the ruling made at the Conference of Carthage.

By Augustine's time, the ecclesiastical provinces were much the same as the Roman administrative ones. At the time of the Conference of Carthage, Donatist Churches flourished in Mauretania Caesariensis, Mauretania Sitifensis, Numidia, Africa Proconsularis, Byzacena and Tripolitania. Mauretania Caesariensis had as its capital Iol Caesarea (Cherchel). The Donatist Church in Iol Caesarea was represented by the

eloquent Bishop Emeritus. Emeritus had taken an active role along with Petilianus at the Conference of Carthage.

Mauretania Sitifensis had Sitifis (Sétif) as its capital; and the cities of Igilgili (Jijel) and Saldae (Bejaia) on the coast. Sitifis was represented by the Donatist bishop Marcianus.

Numidia had shrunk significantly by the fourth century. Its capital had become Cirta (Constantine) and its cities were numerous. Cirta's Donatist bishop was the famous Petilianus, one of Augustine's great adversaries (*Contra Litteras Petiliani Donatistae Cirtensis Episcopi*). In Hippo Regius, Augustine had to deal with Proculianus, a source of some anxiety no doubt for Augustine until 410 CE and then Proculianus' successor Macrobius. Calama (Guelma) had been represented by the Donatist Bishop Crispinus although he passed away just before the Conference. Augustine knew and respected him well enough to come to his defense after Possidius (the Catholic bishop of Calama) had been attacked on a nearby fundus after a heated debate with Crispinus. The greater part of Numidia was insular. Overland traffic from Proconsular Africa to the Mauretaniae would have used the main arteries through Thagaste (Souk Ahras) and Cirta in the north and Theveste (Tébessa), Thamagadi (Timgad) and Lambaesis (Lambèse, near Batna) in the south. Southern Numidia has been called the Donatist heartland by some scholars. Its urban centres were in Mascula (Khenchela), Vegesala (ksar el kelb), Vescera (Biskra), Bagai (Baghai), Ad Maiores (Besseriani) and Badias (Badis). At the Conference, Theveste was represented by Bishop Peseuerantius a Maximianist and by his own definition, a member of the greater Donatist Church. Gaudentius, another important protagonist of Augustine's (*Contra Gaudentium*) was Thamagadi's bishop. Vegesala was represented by Gabinus who would become Catholic after the Conference of Carthage. Gaudentius argued this defection was due to a fear of persecution. Mascula's Donatist bishop was Vitalis, formerly a Catholic deacon rebaptised Donatist. Vescera's Donatist representative was the Bishop Fortunatus and Bagai's was Donatianus whose town had hosted the Donatist Council of Bagai in 394 CE..

In the Proconsular province, Carthage, Hippo Diarrhytus (Bizerte), Thabraca, Bulla Regia and Sicca Veneria constituted some of the larger cities. At the time of the Conference, Carthage, Hippo Diarrhytus and Hippo (Numidia) all had important Roman Italian populations due to the influx caused by the Gothic sacking of Rome one year earlier (410 C.E). In Carthage, Primanus (Donatist bishop) had succeeded Parmenianus; the well-known Parmenius who Optatus of Milevis had called upon to debate the issue.

Byzacena lay between Proconsularis, Numidia and Tripolitania. By Augustine's time in the fifth century its northern ecclesiastical border ran approximately 50 km north of Hadrumetum (Sousse), 25km south of Neapolis (Nabeus) and southwest to near or in Ammaedara (Haidra). It veered south along the approximate Algerian-Tunisian border to Lacus Triconis (Chott El Djerid) on the Tunisian side. Its southern border ran from Lacus Triconis in the east to Tacape (Gabes) in the west. Today a tertiary road from Kebili to Gabes on the southern side of the Djebel Tebaga delineates the probable border. Hadrumetum, Thysdrus (El Djem), Thelepte, Sufetula (Sbeitla), Capsa (Gafsa) and other cities in Byzacena all had their Donatist representatives.

Tripolitania followed the coast line from Tacape in the Gulf of Gabes to the Gulf of Syrte to where As Sidrah is today. Given the more southerly latitude of Libya's northern coastline and its proximity to the desert, Tripolitania was more of a wide than deep

province. Its important cities were all coastal ones; Sabratha, Oea and Leptis Magna and all had Donatist Communities.

From Mauretania Caesariensis to Tripolitania– an area that covered over 1,000 km in width– both Donatist and Catholic Churches flourished.

Most of Augustine’s outspoken Donatist protagonists were located in the provinces Augustine knew well, namely; Numidia, Proconsular, Mauretania Sitifensis and Mauretania Caesariensis– provinces he spent much of his life travelling in. These and the other provinces had over six hundred cities. Hundreds of these cities sent their Donatist and Catholic Bishops to attend the Conference of Carthage. Today identity issues in Algeria must be approached in a way that the Conference of Carthage was not. At the Conference, dialogue and reconciliation were blatantly absent. Insults, bitterness, accusations and counter-accusations destroyed any hope for unity. No effective framework was in place. Interestingly, the key phrase in Algerian polity in the millennial decade is ‘Dialogue and Reconciliation’ and although this is meant to reconcile a nation emerging from a large-scale terrorist war, it is also increasingly implying a cultural and historical reconciliation.

### Bibliography

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