

*Paola Marone (Roma)*

## THE USE OF THE TERM “CATHOLIC” IN THE DONATIST CONTROVERSY

### *1 Introduction*

A letter written by Ignatius to Christians in Smyrna around 110 is the earliest surviving witness to the use of the term “Catholic”. Sometime in the first decade of the second century, Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, was condemned to death *ad bestias*, that is, by wild animals in the amphitheater. He was sent under guard with other prisoners to Rome for the games there, probably in the Flavian Amphitheater, what today we call the Colosseum. As his party made its way up the western coast of Asia Minor, he wrote to a string of Christian communities there after he had received visits from their envoys. When writing to the Christians of Smyrna, he remarked that the Eucharist should be celebrated only by the bishop or someone he delegates, for “wherever the bishop appears, let the whole community be gathered, just as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is ἡ καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία”<sup>1</sup>. A generation later, in the same city, old bishop Polycarp was about to be martyred in the amphitheater. But the narrator of his martyrdom reported that when the police came to arrest him in a country house where he had taken refuge, since it was dinnertime, he ordered food and drink to be set out for them, while he went aside and prayed aloud for two hours. In his prayer, he remembered everyone he had ever encountered and ἡ καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία throughout the world. The narrator finished the report of Polycarp’s martyrdom by concluding that now Polycarp is enjoying the glory of God and Jesus Christ, shepherd of ἡ καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία throughout the world<sup>2</sup>.

The word καθολικός was in general use in Hellenistic Greek, meaning “general” or “universal.” Thus for example Iamblichus<sup>3</sup> spoke of “universal harmony” and Epictetus spoke of οἱ καθολικοὶ as general principles or standards<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, today we

---

<sup>1</sup> IGNATIUS, *Ad Smyrnenses* VIII,2.

<sup>2</sup> *Martyrium Polycarpi* 8,1; 19,2.

<sup>3</sup> IAMBlichus, *De vita Pythagorica* 15,65.

<sup>4</sup> EPICtetus 4,4,29; 2,12,7.

are accustomed to calling the Letters of James, Jude, 1–2 Peter and John the “catholic epistles”, mostly because we really do not have a clue whence they came or whither they were destined. Similarly, the fourth-century Christian historian Eusebius, quoting the anti-Montanist Apollonius, recalled a Montanist writer Themisto, who had written an ἑπιτολή καθολική “in imitation of the apostle”<sup>5</sup>. By the IV century, the word was taking on a more specific meaning of orthodox Christianity, as when Constantine, quoted in Eusebius, refers to the Church represented by Eusebius as the καθολικὴ θρησκεία, perhaps best translated as the catholic religion<sup>6</sup>.

There can be no doubt, however, that it was the struggle with the Donatists which first drew out the full theological significance of the epithet Catholic and passed it on to the schoolmen as an abiding possession<sup>7</sup>. When the Donatists claimed to represent the one true Church of Christ, and formulated certain marks of the Church, which they professed to find in their own body, it could not fail to strike their orthodox opponents that the title Catholic, by which the Church of Christ was universally known, afforded a far surer test, and that this was wholly inapplicable to a sect which was confined to one small corner of the world. The Donatists, unlike all previous heretics, had not gone wrong upon any Christological question. It was their conception of Church discipline and organization which was faulty. Hence, in refuting them, a more or less definite theory of the Church and its marks was gradually evolved by Optatus and Augustine. These doctors particularly insisted upon the note of Catholicity, and they pointed out that both the Old and the New Testament represented the Church as spread over all the earth.

So we wish to consider the problematic reality of the African schism of the IV century in relation to the elaboration of the Catholicity. Besides there are many studies on Donatism and

<sup>5</sup> EUSEBIUS, *Historia ecclesiastica* V,18,5.

<sup>6</sup> See EUSEBIUS, *Historia ecclesiastica* X,6,1.

<sup>7</sup> See E. ROMERO POSE, *Medio siglo de estudios sobre el donatismo. (De Monceaux a nuestros dias)*, «Salmaticensis» 29 (1982), 81-99; B. KRIEGBAUM, *Kirche der Traditoren oder Kirche der Märtyrer? Die Vorgeschichte des Donatismus*, Innsbruck – Wien, 1986; CH. PIETRI, *L'échec de l'unité impériale en Afrique. La résistance donatiste (jusqu'en 361) e La difficulté du nouveau système en Occident: la querelle donatiste (363-420)*, in J.-M. MAYEUR et al., *Histoire du christianisme*, II, Paris, 1995, 229-248 e 435-451; M.A. TILLEY, *The Bible in Christian North Africa. The Donatist World*, Minneapolis, 1997; S. LANCEL – J.S. ALEXANDER, *Donatistae*, in C. MAYER, *Augustinus-Lexikon*, II/3-4, Basel, 1999, 606-638; E. ZOCCA, *L'identità cristiana nel dibattito tra cattolici e donatisti*, «Annali di Storia dell'Esegesi» 21/1 (2004), 109-130.

on the etymology of the term "Catholic"<sup>8</sup>, but it still remains abundantly to define the role of the Catholicity in the polemical context of the Donatist controversy<sup>9</sup>.

## 2. General Characteristics of the Donatist Controversy

The primary disagreement between Donatists and the rest of the early Christian Church was over the treatment of those who renounced their faith during the persecution of Diocletian (303–305), a disagreement that had implications both for the Church's understanding of the Sacrament of Penance and of the other sacraments in general<sup>10</sup>.

As a direct result of the persecution of Diocletian, there arose among the Christians a great enthusiasm for sufferings, and even for death, for the sake of the faith. They were demanded to surrender their sacred books; but not only did many refuse to comply with this demand, but some even stepped forward purposely, and boasted that they had the books, and could by no means be forced to give them up. The name of a *traditor*, that is, one who has surrendered his Bible, became extremely odious. Mensurius, bishop of Carthage, openly opposed the fanaticism of the voluntary martyrs and the extravagant reverence shown to confessors. He sent his archdeacon, Cæcilianus, into the prisons where the confessors sat, and had the crowds which gathered there in enthusiastic devotion dispersed by force. But thereby the fanatics became only so much the more excited, and it was to be expected that they would seize upon the first opportunity to avenge themselves. In 305 a synod was convened at Circa; but, before the synod was opened, the primate of Numidia, bishop Secundus of Tigisis, proposed that an investigation should be made, whether there were any *traditores* among the assembled<sup>11</sup>.

---

<sup>8</sup> See A. GARCÍA DIEGO, *Katholikè Ekklesia (El significado del epíteto "catholica" aplicado a la Iglesia desde San Ignacio de Antioquia hasta Orígenes)*, Mexico 1953; P.M. BREK, *De vocis "catholica" origine et notione*, «Antonianum» 38 (1963), 263-287; J.N.D. KELLY, «Catholique» et «Apostolique» aux premiers siècles, «Istina» 14 (1969), 33-45.

<sup>9</sup> See B. QUINOT, *Traité anti-donatistes de Saint Augustin*, III, (Bibliothèque Augustinienne, 30), Paris 1967, *Note complémentaire: Les donatistes sont-ils catholiques?*, 785-789; E. LAMIRANDE, *Traité anti-donatistes de Saint Augustin*, V, (Bibliothèque Augustinienne, 32), Paris 1965, *Note complémentaire: La conception donatiste de la catholicité*, 702.

<sup>10</sup> On the beginnings of Donatism see E. BUONAIUTI, *Il Cristianesimo nell'Africa Romana*, Bari 1928, 292-311; T.D. BARNES, *The Beginnings of Donatism*, «Journal of Theological Studies» 26 (1975), 13-22.

<sup>11</sup> On the Council of Circa see OPTATUS, *Adversus donatistas* I,13,1-14,3, SCh 412, 200-204; see also S. LANCEL, *Les débuts du donatisme: la date du Protocole de Circa et l'élection de Silvanus*, «Revue des

The result of the investigation was, that nearly every one of the bishops present was proved guilty of the crime, in some form or other. Suspicion fell even upon Secundus himself. He was consequently compelled to drop the investigation; but he, nevertheless, saw fit to assume the attitude of a guardian of the discipline of the Church, and, when he heard of the troubles which had occurred in Carthage, he sent a warning to Mensurius and Cæcilianus. Mensurius died 311, and, according to the common course of affairs, the archdeacon succeeded the bishop; and, as Cæcilianus was known to hold the same views as Mensurius, the moderates hastened to elect him, without awaiting the arrival of the Numidian bishops, and without inviting the primate, Secundus of Tigisis, to perform the consecration. The Numidian bishops felt much offended at the slight shown to them, and allied themselves with the rigorists. Secundus convened a synod, and summoned Cæcilianus to defend himself. As Cæcilianus did not appear before the synod, he was deposed and excommunicated, and Majorinus was elected in his stead. When Majorinus died (in 313), Donatus, called the Great, became his successor<sup>12</sup>.

Thus the schism originated in the Church of Carthage. There were two bishops and two congregations. From the capital it spread through the whole province. A majority of the country people, and a considerable number of bishops, declared in favor of Donatus<sup>13</sup>. Outside of Africa, however, Cæcilianus was generally recognized as the legitimate bishop; and the opposite party were considered as schismatics who had separated from the true Catholic Church. In an edict of 313 Constantine promised the Church of Africa his protection; but the Donatists were expressly excluded from the imperial favor<sup>14</sup>.

The Donatists refused to accept the sacraments and spiritual authority of the priests and bishops who had fallen away from the faith during the persecution. Besides they insisted that anyone who remained in communion with an apostate bishop participated in his sin and rendered himself also outside the Church. In any case they remained faithful to the tradition of the African

---

Études Augustiniennes» 25 (1979), 217-229; J.A. FISCHER, *Das kleine Konzil zu Circa im Jahr 305 (?)*, «Annuaire Historiae Conciliorum» 18 (1986), 281-292.

<sup>12</sup> On Donatus of Cartagine, eponym of Donatism, see A. MANDOUZE, *Le mystère Donat*, in *Bulletin de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France*, Paris 1982, 98-104.

<sup>13</sup> See W.H.C. FRENCH, *The Donatist Church. A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa*, Oxford 1983, 141-192.

<sup>14</sup> On Constantine see F. MARTROYE, *La répression du donatisme et la politique religieuse de Constantin et de ses successeurs en Afrique*, «Mémoires de la Société Nationale des Antiquaires de France» 73 (1913), 23-40; P.P. JOANNOU, *La législation impériale et la christianisation de l'Empire romain (311-476)*, (*Orientalia christiana analecta*, 192), Roma 1972, 34s.

Church as represented by Cyprian and Tertullian<sup>15</sup>. Their vision of the Church included a mystical union of the righteous inspired by the Holy Spirit and instructed by the Bible. In their opinion Church leaders were regarded very highly and the standards expected of them were equally high: they must live exemplary lives and be willing to suffer for their faith; any compromise, morally or in the face of persecution, made someone unworthy to be a Church leader.

Donatus, the eponym of the sect, had died in exile, and was succeeded by Parmenian, an able and comparatively moderate man. With him begins the first phase of the literary debate between Donatists and Catholics<sup>16</sup>. The opponent of Parmenian was Optatus, bishop of Milevis, who was still living after 384. Under Valentinian and Valens (364-375), Optatus published his great work, *Adversus donatistas*, in answer to that of the Donatist bishop of Carthage, Parmenianus<sup>17</sup>. Optatus himself tells us that he was writing after the death of Julian (363) and more than sixty years after the beginning of the schism. The form which we possess is a second edition, brought up to date by the author after the accession of Pope Siricius (Dec., 384), with a seventh book added to the original six. It is to be noted that Parmenian and Optatus both believed in the visible unity of the Church. But Parmenian, insisting on the holiness of the Church, identified her with the separatist body in Africa, while Optatus insisted upon the Catholicity of the Church, and upon her Apostolicity as tested by communion with the chair of Peter and with the seven Churches of the Apocalypse<sup>18</sup>.

Soon after the priestly ordination in 391, also Augustine began a victorious adversary of Donatism. His popular *Psalmus contra partem Donati* was intended to make known to the people the arguments set forth by Optatus, with the same conciliatory end in view. It shows that the sect was founded by traitors, condemned by pope and council, separated from the whole world, a cause of division, violence, and bloodshed; the true Church is the one Vine, whose branches are over all the earth. After Augustine had become bishop in 395, he obtained conferences with some of the Donatist leaders, though not with his rival at Hippo. In 400 he wrote three books against the letter of Parmenianus, refuting his calumnies and his arguments from Scripture. More

---

<sup>15</sup> On the tradition of the African Church see E. ROMERO POSE, *Donatismo, dottrina*, in A. DI BERARDINO, *Dizionario Patristico e di Antichità Cristiane*, I, Casale Monferrato 1983, 1018-1022.

<sup>16</sup> Initially the Donatists had written the so-called *libelli*. See *Codex Theodosianus* IX,34,1; IX,34,2; IX,34,5; see also PIETRI, *L'échec*, 239-243.

<sup>17</sup> See HIERONYMUS, *De viris illustribus* 110.

<sup>18</sup> On *Adversus donatistas* see C. MAZZUCCO, *Ottato di Milevi in un secolo di studi: problemi e prospettive*, (Università degli studi di Torino. Dipartimento di filologia, linguistica e tradizione classica, 3), Bologna 1993.

important were his seven books on baptism, in which, after developing the principle already laid down by Optatus, that the effect of the sacrament is independent of the holiness of the minister, he shows in great detail that the authority of Cyprian is more awkward than convenient for the Donatists. The principal Donatist controversialist of the day was Petilianus, bishop of Constantine, a successor of the traditor Silvanus. Augustine wrote two books in reply to a letter of his against the Church, adding a third book to answer another letter in which he was himself attacked by Petilianus. To these works must be added some sermons and some letters which are real treatises<sup>19</sup>.

Augustine fought Donatism in part with arguments which had been current for over two generations of the controversy, and which we find less lucidly formulated in Optatus, partly with conceptions which his own personal history and reflections had impressed upon his mind before he came into the conflict. The utmost that can justly be said – but that much is important – is that the Donatist conflict crystallized ideas which needed a shock of the kind to bring them into clear shape and form. It was beside the purpose to insist, as Cyprian had done, upon the episcopate, which the Donatists possessed, or upon the unity of the Church, which they claimed for themselves.

Finally in Oct. 410 Honorius instructed the proconsul of Africa, Marcellinus, to make all necessary preparations and act as president at the debates between Catholics and Donatists. He issued an edict (Jan. 411) inviting Catholic and Donatist bishops to meet in June at Carthage and elect representatives, promising safe-conduct and suspending meanwhile all processes against Donatists. So the imperial commissioner declared the Donatists vanquished, and very severe measures were decided upon against them.

### *3. The Use of the Term “Catholic” in the Donatist and anti-Donatist Literature*

When the term “Catholic” was known in the pagan world, and had assumed already an ecclesial connotation in the Christian world, the Christian authors of Africa began to use it. In Africa – as we said above – the Church found herself divided. Every town and village had the representatives of two rival communions. Both claimed to be the one Church outside which there is no salvation. However Catholics and Donatists were not divided by the doctrinal issues which

---

<sup>19</sup> On anti-donatist works of Augustine P. MONCEAUX, *Histoire littéraire de l’Afrique chrétienne VII: Saint Augustin et le Donatisme*, Paris 1923.

exercised IV and V century theologians. They disagreed profoundly about some issues of ecclesiology.

The Donatists asserted to represent the true Church of Christ and attributed to themselves the epithet of "Catholics", not for their geographic spread, but for their holiness. They boasted to observe all the commandments of God and to conserve really intact the entire patrimony of the revealed truth. Arguing about the *De ecclesiae catholicae unitate* of Cyprian, and about unity of Christ's Body<sup>20</sup>, they thought to be the only Church of Africa. They often claimed firmly to represent the authentic ecclesiastical tradition<sup>21</sup>. So the old documents of the sect<sup>22</sup>, the treatises of schismatic bishop Parmenian<sup>23</sup> and many indirect testimonies of the Donatist literature<sup>24</sup> presented them as "Catholics". Still in the Conference of Cartage (411), the schismatics claimed the name of "Catholics", who generally was associated with their adversaries<sup>25</sup>. During that Conference, the Donatist bishop Gaudentius saw the preservation of the law in a hostile world as a reason sufficient to recognize the Catholicity, not in the geographic extension, but in the holiness of the believers. Consequently Gaudentius ascribed the *nomen catholicum* to that religious community that was separate from the so-called *traditores*<sup>26</sup>.

In short the followers of Donatus defined their Church as "Catholic". For them that denomination was founded on the legitimacy and on the integrity of the believers. For them that denomination was inherent in the purity and the holiness of a community "not having one mark or fold" (Eph. 5:27).<sup>27</sup> Therefore the schismatic Church identified herself with the spouse of Christ (see Cant. 6:8) and with the flock of Christ (see Cant. 1:7)<sup>28</sup>. Since Donatism was flour-

---

<sup>20</sup> See CYPRIANUS, *De ecclesiae catholicae unitate* 23; see also J.-P. BRISSON, *Autonomisme et christianisme dans l'Afrique romaine de Septime Sévère à l'invasion vandale*, Paris 1958, 43-49.

<sup>21</sup> See for example AUGUSTINUS, *Contra litteras Petiliani* II,38,90; see also A. MANDOUZE, *Encore le donatisme*, «L'Antiquité classique» 29 (1960), 85-90.

<sup>22</sup> See *Gesta Collationis Carthaginiensis* III,220; AUGUSTINUS, *Ep.* 88,2; see also E. CAROTENUTO, *Six Constantinian Documents (Eus. H.E. 10,5-7)*, «Vigiliae Christianae» 56 (2002), 60-61.

<sup>23</sup> See OPTATUS, *Adversus donatistas* II,1; AUGUSTINUS, *Contra epistulam Parmeniani* II,2,5.

<sup>24</sup> See AUGUSTINUS, *Ep.* 93,7,23.

<sup>25</sup> See *Gesta Collationis Carthaginiensis* I,14; III,251.

<sup>26</sup> See *Gesta Collationis Carthaginiensis* III,102.

<sup>27</sup> See AUGUSTINUS, *Contra epistulam Parmeniani* II,2,5.

<sup>28</sup> See AUGUSTINUS, *Epistula ad catholicos* 16,40; see also Y.M.-J. CONGAR, *Traité anti-donatistes de Saint Augustin*, I, (Bibliothèque Augustinienne, 28), Paris 1963, *Note complémentaire: Cant. 1,6-7 dans la discussion entre Augustin et les donatistes*, 747.

ished exclusively in Africa, the African schismatics considered the Catholicity as the true manifestation of the Christianity<sup>29</sup> and used the term “Catholic” as synonym of “Christian”<sup>30</sup>.

Therefore Optatus refuted all these ideas. Confiding in the authority of the Bible, he showed that the Church was spread over all the earth. In fact he said: “where will that be which the Father has freely granted Him, saying, in the second Psalm: 'I will give to Thee the nations for Thine inheritance; and the ends of the earth for Thy possession'? (Ps. 2:8)”<sup>31</sup>. And he added: “God proves this when he says: 'I will give unto Thee the nations for Thine inheritance, and for Thy possession the bounds of the earth' (Ps. 71:8)”<sup>32</sup>. On the basis of these considerations he concluded: “And so, in order that she may be with you in a little piece of Africa, in a corner of one small region, is she not to be with us in another part of Africa? Is she not to be in Spain, in Gaul, in Italy, where you are not?”<sup>33</sup>. But the bishop of Milevis did not spike only of geographic extension. In fact we read in the *Adversus donatistas* that the true Church is “Catholic” not only because is *ubique diffusa*, but also because is *rationabilis*<sup>34</sup>. Therefore for Optatus the Church was κ α θ ὄ λ ο υ = “throughout the whole”, and κ α τ ᾽ ἄ λ ο γ ο υ = “accordance with reason”. The Church was Catholic or *rationabilis* (according to right reason) in contradistinction to *heretics*, who had strayed from the truth (against the due exercise of their reason); and she was Catholic or *ubique diffusa* (spread everywhere) in contradistinction to schismatics, who were confined within clearly defined, very often within national, bounds and limits<sup>35</sup>.

The whole schism has arisen through the quarrel as to the episcopal succession at Carthage. The question is simply this: Which is the true Church?<sup>36</sup> And it might have been expected that Optatus would claim this property of cathedra by pointing out the legitimacy of the Catholic succession at Carthage. But he did not. He replied: “We must examine who sat first in the chair, and where... You cannot deny that you know that in the city of Rome upon Peter first the chair of the bishop was conferred, in which sat the head of all the Apostles, Peter, whence also he was

<sup>29</sup> See *Gesta Collationis Carthaginiensis* III,90-94.

<sup>30</sup> See *Gesta Collationis Carthaginiensis* III,99.

<sup>31</sup> OPTATUS, *Adversus donatistas* II,1.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*; see also OPTATUS, *Adversus donatistas* II,9; II,12; IV,3.

<sup>34</sup> OPTATUS, *Adversus donatistas* II,1.

<sup>35</sup> See O.R. VASSALL-PHILLIPS, *The Work of St. Optatus, Bishop of Milevis, against the Donatists, with Appendix*, London 1917, 59, n. 3.

<sup>36</sup> See OPTATUS, *Adversus donatistas* I,6; see also BRISSON, *Autonomisme*, 161.

called Cephas, in which one chair unity should be preserved by all, lest the other Apostles should each stand up for his own chair, so that now he should be a schismatic and a sinner who should against this one chair set up another. Therefore in the one chair, which is the first of the dots Peter first sat, to whom succeeded Linus"<sup>37</sup>. For Optatus, the legitimate bishop of Carthage was the one who did not desert the chair of Peter, as the Donatist had done. But Optatus was also quick to point out that it is Peter who was endowed with the keys to the kingdom of heaven (see Mt. 16:19). They have been granted to Peter alone<sup>38</sup>, and through Peter to the other apostles. No heretic could possibly possess them. Like the chair of Peter, the keys were a guarantee of the unity of the Church. "For the sake of unity" Optatus maintained "blessed Peter... both deserved to be placed over all the apostles and alone received the keys to the kingdom which he communicated to the rest..."<sup>39</sup>. The keys, of course, signify the power to bind and loose; their bestowal on Peter, and in turn, his bestowal of them upon his fellow apostles guarantees their sharing in common – guarantees their unity in – the power of forgiveness.

Bringing forward the argument from geographic Catholicity, Optatus noted that North African Catholics were in communion with the see of Rome. Obviously, the communion with Rome, the most important and sole apostolic see of the west, was emphasized in order to highlight the isolation of the Donatist in North Africa.

At the end of the IV century also Augustine spoke of Catholicity. Initially he defined the Catholic Church as the universal Church. In the *De Genesis ad litteram imperfectus liber*, he said: *Constitutam ab illo (scil. Christo) matrem Ecclesiam, quae Catholica dicitur, ex eo quia universaliter perfecta est, et in nullo claudicat, et per totum orbem diffusa est*<sup>40</sup>. And then he admitted that in Greek ὅ λ ο υ means "whole", and κ α θ ὄ λ ο υ means "throughout the whole"<sup>41</sup>. Augustine wished to emphasize the contrast between the universality of his commu-

---

<sup>37</sup> OPTATUS, *Adversus donatistas* II,2-3. On the originality of Optatus see R.B. ENO, *The Work of Optatus as a Turning Point in the African Ecclesiology*, «Thomist» 37 (1973), 680-685; P. MARONE, *L'esegesi biblica di Ottato di Milevi come veicolo della trasformazione della teologia africana*, «Annali di Storia dell'Esegesi» 23 (2006), 215-222.

<sup>38</sup> See OPTATUS, *Adversus donatistas* I,10.

<sup>39</sup> See OPTATUS, *Adversus donatistas* VII,3.

<sup>40</sup> AUGUSTINUS, *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* 1,4; see also O. PERLER, *Le "De unitate" (chap. IV-V) interprété par saint Augustin*, in *Augustinus Magister*, II, Paris 1954, 835-858.

<sup>41</sup> See AUGUSTINUS, *Contra litteras Petilianus* II,38,90; IDEM, *Epistula ad catholicos* 2,2; IDEM, *Contra Gaudentium* II,2.

nity and the narrowness of the Donatist community<sup>42</sup>. But with regard to the Catholicity, he appealed not only to the question of the geographic extension, but also to question of the communion with the chair of Rome<sup>43</sup>.

For some time Christianity was politically and socially ascendant. So Augustine expressed the enthusiasm of many Christians that the Roman Empire evinced the conversion of the whole world to Christianity and that this was a manifest sign that God was fulfilling His promise in Psalm 2:7-8 that He would give to His Son “the Gentiles for Thine inheritance and the utmost parts of the earth for Thy possession”<sup>44</sup>. Indeed, the universal extent of the Church was what Augustine primarily had in mind when he spoke of “Catholicity” of the Church. Yet the official character of the Church within the Roman Empire entailed the fact that the people who attended the Church’s worship could not be regarded as equally committed to the faith or even as believers at all. The official and universal character of the Church required of Augustine that he reflect on the nature of the Church and of the sacraments in a context where the holiness of the Church was not so visible as it once seemed to have been.

But it was not the apologetic claim that the Church’s universality was the fulfilment of God’s promises which was most important for Augustine’s conviction that the Church was a mixed society of saints and sinners (*corpus permixtum*)<sup>45</sup>. For this reason Augustine distinguished between the Church as it is now during her earthly pilgrimage and the Church as she will be when she achieves her final goal of sanctity. Again he distinguished between the Church as she appears to be, a world-wide communion embracing both saints and sinners, and the Church as she really is, a community of saints, known only to God<sup>46</sup>. Thus he spoke of schismatics as in the present separated from Christ’s Body, in so far as they do not belong to the Catholic communion, though some of these may nevertheless be true members, in so far as they are predestined in the foreknowledge to become so<sup>47</sup>.

<sup>42</sup> M. Pontet, *L'exégèse de saint Augustin prédicateur*, Paris 1944, 419s: “A la suite d’Optat de Milève, saint Augustin réduit presque les marques divines de l’Église à celles de la catholicité et d’une catholicité conçue avant tout comme une extension à travers l’espace”.

<sup>43</sup> See AUGUSTINUS, *Contra litteras Petiliani* II,5,10.

<sup>44</sup> See AUGUSTINUS, *De vera religione* 4.6; see also L. DE MONDADON, *Bible et Église dans l’apologétique de saint Augustin*, «Recherches de Science Religieuse» 2 (1911), 449-453.

<sup>45</sup> See AUGUSTINUS, *De baptismo* IV,10,14; see also W.H.C. FRENCH, *Saints and Sinners in the Early Church. Differing and Conflicting Traditions in the First Six Centuries*, London 1985, 94-117.

<sup>46</sup> See AUGUSTINUS, *De Baptismo* IV,3,4.

<sup>47</sup> AUGUSTINUS, *Contra epistulam Parmeniani* III,4,24; see also CONGAR, *Traité, Note complémentaire: Securis iudicat orbis terrarum*, 743; G. BAVAUD, *Traité anti-donatistes de Saint Augustin*, II, (Biblio-

In any case, for Augustine there was an ecclesiological reality in which both saints and sinners participate. He called this reality the “communion of the Church and the most holy bond of unity and the most excellent gift of charity”, meaning the empirical Church in her administration and reception of the sacraments<sup>48</sup>.

#### 4. Conclusion

In the IV century in Africa the ecclesiology assumed a special meaning in the definition of the religion. After schism of the IV century the search of the constituent elements of the Church became the fulcrum of the theological debate. The one question of paramount importance was: “Which and where is the One Church?”<sup>49</sup> And to this question the answer of Optatus was clear-cut and unmistakable in its import: “the Church of Christ may be easily recognised by all those who will look for her marks. She and she alone is One; she and she alone is truly Catholic. In fact this is her name *Catholica*, because all over the world (*ubique*) her children are in communion with the *cathedra Petri*, the See of that Apostle to whom alone the Lord promised the keys of the kingdom of heaven”<sup>50</sup>. Certainly “Optat, avant Augustin, - as Congar observed - est passé d’une considération de l’Église vue dans le cadre de la seule autorité de l’évêque personnifiant l’*ecclesia* locale, à une ecclésiologie de la communion universelle des évêques, ou même de l’unité de toutes les Églises locales dans la société ecclésiale totale”<sup>51</sup>.

Therefore Optatus was the first writer known to us who sets out in detail the Catholic conception of the one true Church of Christ. And the opportunity came to him only with the Donatist schism. It will always be the great merit of Optatus to have seized that opportunity and to have availed himself of it to such an extent, that Augustine had but to broaden it out and illustrate it with his matchless genius.

---

thèque Augustinienne, 29), Paris 1964, *Note complémentaire: Saint Augustin croit-il à l’existence de dissidents de bonne foi?*, 582-584.

<sup>48</sup> See AUGUSTINUS, *Contra Litteras Petiliani* II,81,178.

<sup>49</sup> See *supra* n. 36.

<sup>50</sup> See OPTATUS, *Adversus donatistas* II,1.

<sup>51</sup> CONGAR, *Traité, Introduction générale*, 78.