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ILLITERATE BISHOPS DECIDED THE CANON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT! OR DID THEY?

It is often claimed that the canon lists given in the canons of the council of Hippo in 393, and the council of Carthage in 397, in some way created the canon of the New Testament. This is not the case, and cannot be the case – the lists are merely for local use in deciding what books to read in church.

But I was intrigued by some comments on the bishops, by none other than Henry Chadwick:^[1]

The old bishop of Hippo who had ordained Augustine presbyter feared lest some other church might carry him off to be their bishop. He therefore persuaded the primate of Numidia to consecrate Augustine to be coadjutor bishop of Hippo. The appointment (irregular in canon law) became surrounded by some controversy. The combination of Augustine's Manichee past and his extreme cleverness helped to make him distrusted. Hippo was not a city where people read books. Numidia was not a province where congregations expected to have a prodigy of intelligence on the episcopal bench. (Augustine noted that illiterate bishops were a favourite butt for the mockery of the half-educated: CR 13.) Augustine's presence induced apprehension. He was known to be a terror for demolishing opponents in public disputations. Some did not quite believe in the sincerity of his conversion at Milan.

“CR 13” is chapter 13 of *De catechizandis rudibus* (on the need to instruct newcomers). But a look at the old English translation online does not really support this, interesting tho it is:

13. There are also some who come from the commonest schools of the grammarians and professional speakers, whom you may not venture to reckon, either among the uneducated, or among those very learned classes whose minds have been exercised in questions of real magnitude.

When such persons, therefore, who appear to be superior to the rest of mankind, so far as the art of speaking is concerned, approach you with the view of becoming Christians, it will be your duty in your communications with them, in a higher degree than in your dealings with those other illiterate hearers, to make it plain that they are to be diligently admonished to clothe themselves with Christian humility, and learn not to despise individuals whom they may discover keeping themselves free from vices of conduct more carefully than from faults of language; and also that they ought not to presume so much as to compare with a pure heart the practised tongue which they were accustomed even to put in preference.

But above all, such persons should be taught to listen to the divine Scriptures, so that they may neither deem solid eloquence to be mean, merely because it is

not inflated, nor suppose that the words or deeds of men, of which we read the accounts in those books, involved and covered as they are in carnal wrappings, are not to be drawn forth and unfolded with a view to an (adequate) understanding of them, but are to be taken merely according to the sound of the letter. And as to this same matter of the utility of the hidden meaning, the existence of which is the reason why they are called also mysteries, the power wielded by these intricacies of enigmatical utterances in the way of sharpening our love for the truth, and shaking off the torpor of weariness, is a thing which the persons in question must have made good to them by actual experience, when some subject which failed to move them when it was placed baldly before them, has its significance elicited by the detailed working out of an allegorical sense.

For it is in the highest degree useful to such men to come to know how ideas are to be preferred to words, just as the soul is preferred to the body.

From this, too, it follows that they ought to have the desire to listen to discourses remarkable for their truth, rather than to those which are notable for their eloquence; just as they ought to be anxious to have friends distinguished for their wisdom, rather than those whose chief merit is their beauty.

They should also understand that there is no voice for the ears of God save the affection of the soul. For thus they will not act the mocker if they happen to observe any of the prelates and ministers of the Church either calling upon God in language marked by barbarisms and solecisms, or failing in understanding correctly the very words which they are pronouncing, and making confused pauses.

It is not meant, of course, that such faults are not to be corrected, so that the people may say 'Amen' to something which they plainly understand; but what is intended is, that such things should be piously borne with by those who have come to understand how, as in the forum it is in the sound, so in the church it is in the desire that the grace of speech resides. Therefore that of the forum may sometimes be called good speech, but never gracious speech.

Moreover, with respect to the sacrament which they are about to receive, it is enough for the more intelligent simply to hear what the thing signifies. But with those of slower intellect, it will be necessary to adopt a somewhat more detailed explanation, together with the use of similitudes, to prevent them from despising what they see.

This makes no reference to illiterate bishops. Chadwick was a great scholar, but all of us can fall victim to printer errors. So what did he have in mind?

The answer seems to be a passage in Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne depuis les origines jusqu'à l'invasion arabe*, (1901) vol. 4, p.423, [here](#)^[1].

Des incidents de toute sorte mettent un peu de variété, ou même de gaieté, dans la monotonie des débats. Ce sont les scrupules bouffons des Donatistes, qui refusent de s'asseoir. Ce sont les scènes amusantes ou violentes, auxquelles

donne lieu la vérification des signatures: confrontation des évêques d'une même localité, qui se regardent de travers et s'injurient ou s'accusent mutuellement ... ou d'ailleurs; attitude piteuse de pauvres prélats qui n'ont pu signer eux-mêmes, ne sachant pas écrire[10]; fréquentes interventions et bavardage d'Aurelius de Macomades,

10) Collat. Carthag., I, 133 : « litteras nesciente ».

Incidents of all sorts brought variety or even gaiety in the monotony of the debates. There were the idiotic scruples of the Donatists who refused to sit down. There were amusing or violent scenes, caused by the verification of signatures: the confrontation of bishops belonging to the same place, who stared at each other and mutually insulted or accused...; the pitiful attitude of poor prelates who could not sign themselves, not knowing how to write[10]; the frequent interjections and jokes of Aurelius of Macomades...

This is undoubtedly our source; the reference given is to the *Gesta Collationis Carthaginensis* (CPL 724), the minutes of the miserable, rigged state-sponsored conference (*collatio*) of 411 AD between the Catholics, led by Aurelius and Augustine, and the Donatists. As it happens, a new edition of this text has been published by the CSEL,^[3] and a Google Books preview includes [page 129](#), on which the relevant section appears:

Et recitavit: "Qui supra pro Paulino Zurensi praesente litteras nesciente coram viro clarissimo tribuno et notario Marcellino suprascripta mandavi et subscripsi Carthagini." Quo recitato et accedente episcopo Paulino catholico idem dixit: "Catholica est." Habetdeum diaconus Primiani episcopi dixit: "Presbyter est illic noster. Diocesis est nostra."

As the bishops confirmed their signatures, one by one, the poor catholic bishop Paulinus of Zura had to listen to this as it was read out, *litteras nesciente*, *not knowing his letters*.

But I didn't see any other examples. Was this the only one?

The *collatio* is unusual because of the verbatim record of the proceedings. But the same people were at other synods. It is defensible that some of those attending were illiterate. But at such proceedings, they must have been very rare indeed.

1. ^[1]Augustine: *A very short introduction*, Oxford (1986) p.68↩

2. ^[2]I owe this reference to Garry Wills, "Augustine's Hippo: Power Relations (410-417)", *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics*, Third Series, Vol. 7 (1999), 98-119, [JSTOR](#), p.103.↩

3. ^[3]C. Weidmann (ed.), *Collatio Carthaginensis anni 411: Gesta collationis Carthaginensis Augustinus, Breviculus collationis Augustinus, Ad Donatistas post collationem*, De Gruyter, 2018. The Gesta are printed in Serge Lancel, *Actes de la Conférence de Carthage en 411*, 3 vols. (Sources chrétiennes 194, 195, and 224) (Paris, 1972 and 1975), in *Gesta Conlationis Carthaginensis Anno 411*, volume 149A of *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, also edited by Lancel (Turnhout, Belgium, 1974); J.-P. Migne, *Patrologia*

Latina 11.1257- 1418 (Paris, 1844-); and in J. D. Mansi, *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* 4.19-246 (Florence, 1739-1798; reprint and continuation: Paris, 1901-1927).↩
