

# Donatists

The Donatist schism in Africa began in 311 and flourished just one hundred years, until the conference at Carthage in 411, after which its importance waned.

## CAUSES OF THE SCHISM

In order to trace the origin of the division we have to go back to the persecution under Diocletian. The first edict of that emperor against Christians (24 Feb., 303) commanded their churches to be destroyed, their Sacred Books to be delivered up and burnt, while they themselves were outlawed. Severer measures followed in 304, when the fourth edict ordered all to offer incense to the idols under pain of death. After the abdication of Maximian in 305, the persecution seems to have abated in Africa. Until then it was terrible. In Numidia the governor, Florus, was infamous for his cruelty, and, though many officials may have been, like the proconsul Anulinus, unwilling to go further than they were obliged, yet St. Optatus is able to say of the Christians of the whole country that some were confessors, some were martyrs, some fell, only those who were hidden escaped. The exaggerations of the highly strung African character showed themselves. A hundred years earlier Tertullian had taught that flight from persecution was not permissible. Some now went beyond this, and voluntarily gave themselves up to martyrdom as Christians. Their motives were, however, not always above suspicion. Mensurius, the Bishop of Carthage, in a letter to Secundus, Bishop of Tigisi, then the senior bishop (primate) of Numidia, declares that he had forbidden any to be honoured as martyrs who had given themselves up of their own accord, or who had boasted that they possessed copies

of the Scriptures which they would not relinquish; some of these, he says, were criminals and debtors to the State, who thought they might by this means rid themselves of a burdensome life, or else wipe away the remembrance of their misdeeds, or at least gain money and enjoy in prison the luxuries supplied by the kindness of Christians. The later excesses of the Circumcellions show that Mensurius had some ground for the severe line he took. He explains that he had himself taken the Sacred Books of the Church to his own house, and had substituted a number of heretical writings, which the prosecutors had seized without asking for more; the proconsul, when informed of the deception refused to search the bishop's private house. Secundus, in his reply, without blaming Mensurius, somewhat pointedly praised the martyrs who in his own province had been tortured and put to death for refusing to deliver up the Scriptures; he himself had replied to the officials who came to search: "I am a Christian and a bishop, not a traditor." This word traditor became a technical expression to designate those who had given up the Sacred Books, and also those who had committed the worse crimes of delivering up the sacred vessels and even their own brethren.

It is certain that relations were strained between the confessors in prison at Carthage and their bishop. If we may credit the Donatist Acts of the forty-nine martyrs of Abitene, they broke off communion with Mensurius. We are informed in these Acts that Mensurius was a traditor by his own confession, and that his deacon, Caecilian, raged more furiously against the martyrs than did the persecutors themselves; he set armed men with whips before the door of the prison to prevent their receiving any succor; the food brought by the piety of the Christians was thrown to the dogs by these ruffians, and the drink provided

was spilled in the street, so that the martyrs, whose condemnation the mild proconsul had deferred, died in prison of hunger and thirst. The story is recognized by Duchesne and others as exaggerated. It would be better to say that the main point is incredible; the prisoners would not have been allowed by the Roman officials to starve; the details - that Mensurius confessed himself a traitor, that he prevented the succoring of the imprisoned confessors - are simply founded on the letter of Mensurius to Secundus. Thus we may safely reject all the latter part of the Acts as fictitious. The earlier part is authentic: it relates how certain of the faithful of Abitene met and celebrated their usual Sunday service, in defiance of the emperor's edict, under the leadership of the priest Saturninus, for their bishop was a traitor and they disowned him; they were sent to Carthage, made bold replies when interrogated, and were imprisoned by Anulinus, who might have condemned them to death forthwith. The whole account is characteristic of the fervid African temperament. We can well imagine how the prudent Mensurius and his lieutenant, the deacon Caecilian, were disliked by some of the more excitable among their flock.

We know in detail how the inquiries for sacred books were carried out, for the official minutes of an investigation at Cirta (afterwards Constantine) in Numidia are preserved. The bishop and his clergy showed themselves ready to give up all they had, but drew the line at betraying their brethren; even here their generosity was not remarkable, for they added that the names and addresses were well known to the officials. The examination was conducted by Munatius Felix, perpetual flamen, curator of the colony of Cirta. Having arrived with his satellites at the bishop's house - in Numidia the searching was more severe than in Proconsular Africa - the bishop was found with four priests, three deacons,

four subdeacons, and several fossores (diggers). These declared that the Scriptures were not there, but in the hands of the lectors; and in fact the bookcase was found to be empty. The clergy present refused to give the names of the lectors, saying they were known to the notaries; but, with the exception of the books, they gave in an inventory of all possessions of the church: two golden chalices, six of silver, six silver cruets, a silver bowl, seven silver lamps, two candlesticks, seven short bronze lamp-stands with lamps, eleven bronze lamps with chains, eighty-two women's tunics, twenty-eight veils, sixteen men's tunics, thirteen pairs of men's boots, forty-seven pairs of women's boots, nineteen countrymen's smocks. Presently the subdeacon Silvanus brought forth a silver box and another silver lamp, which he had found behind a jug. In the dining-room were four casks and seven jugs. A subdeacon produced a thick book. Then the houses of the lectors were visited: Eugenius gave up four volumes, Felix, the mosaic worker gave up five, Victorinus eight, Projectus five large volumes and two small ones, the grammarian Victor two codices and five quinions, or gatherings of five leaves; Euticius of Caesarea declared that he had no books; the wife of Coddeo produced six volumes, and said that she had no more; and a search was made without further result. It is interesting to note that the books were all codices (in book form), not rolls, which had gone out of fashion in the course of the preceding century.

It is to be hoped that such disgraceful scenes were infrequent. A contrasting instance of heroism is found in the story of Felix, Bishop of Tibiuca, who was hauled before the magistrate on the very day, 5 June 303, when the decree was posted up in that city. He refused to give up any books, and was sent to Carthage. The proconsul Anulinus, unable by close confinement to weaken his

determination, sent him on to Rome to Maximian Hercules.

In 305, the persecution had relaxed, and it was possible to unite fourteen or more bishops at Cirta in order to give a successor to Paul. Secundus presided as primate, and in his zeal he attempted to examine the conduct of his colleagues.

They met in a private house, for the Church had not yet been restored to the Christians. "We must first try ourselves", said the primate, "before we can venture to ordain a bishop". To Donatus of Mascula he said: "You are said to have been a traditor." "You know", replied the bishop, "how Florus searched for me that I might offer incense, but God did not deliver me into his hands, brother. As God forgave me, do you reserve me to His judgment." "What then", said Secundus, "shall we say of the martyrs? It is because they did not give up anything that they were crowned." "Send me to God," said Donatus, "to Him will I give an account." (In fact, a bishop was not amenable to penance and was properly "reserved to God" in this sense.) "Stand on one side", said the president, and to Marinus of Aquae Tibilitanae he said: "You also are said to be a traditor." Marinus said: "I gave papers to Pollux; my books are safe." This was not satisfactory, and Secundus said: "Go over to that side"; then to Donatus of Calama: "You are said to be a traditor." "I gave up books on medicine."

Secundus seems to have been incredulous, or at least he thought a trial was needed, for again he said: "Stand on one side." After a gap in the Acts, we read that Secundus turned to Victor, Bishop of Russicade: "You are said to have given up the Four Gospels." Victor replied: "It was the curator, Valentinus; he forced me to throw them into the fire. Forgive me this fault, and God will also forgive it." Secundus said: "Stand on one side." Secundus (after another gap) said to Purpurius of Limata: "You are said to have killed the two sons of your sister at

Mileum" (Milevis). Purpurius answered with vehemence: "Do you think I am frightened by you as the others are? What did you do yourself when the curator and his officials tried to make you give up the Scriptures? How did you manage to get off scot-free, unless you gave them something, or ordered something to be given? They certainly did not let you go for nothing! As for me I have killed and I kill those who are against me; do not provoke me to say anymore. You know that I do not interfere where I have no business." At this outburst, a nephew of Secundus said to the primate: "You hear what they say of you? He is ready to withdraw and make a schism; and the same is true of all those whom you accuse; and I know they are capable of turning you out and condemning you, and you alone will then be the heretic. What is it to you what they have done? Each must give his account to God." Secundus (as St. Augustine points out) had apparently no reply against the accusation of Purpurius, so he turned to the two or three bishops who remained unaccused: "What do you think?" These answered: "They have God to whom they must give an account." Secundus said: "You know and God knows. Sit down." And all replied: Deo gratis.

These minutes have been preserved for us by St. Augustine. The later Donatists declared them forged, but not only could St. Optatus refer to the age of the parchment on which they were written, but they are made easily credible by the testimonies given before Zenophilus in 320. Seeck, as well as Duchesne (see below), upholds their genuineness. We hear from St. Optatus of another fallen Numidian bishop, who refused to come to the council on the pretext of bad eyes, but in reality for fear his fellow-citizens should prove that he had offered incense, a crime of which the other bishops were not guilty. The bishops proceeded to ordain a bishop, and they chose Silvanus, who, as a subdeacon,

assisted in the search for sacred vessels. The people of Cirta rose up against him, crying that he was a traditor, and demanded the appointment of a certain Donatus. But country people and gladiators were engaged to set him in the episcopal chair, to which he was carried on the back of a man named Mutus.

#### CAECILIAN AND MAJORINUS

A certain Donatus of Casae Nigrae is said to have caused a schism in Carthage during the lifetime of Mensurius. In 311 Maxentius obtained dominion over Africa, and a deacon of Carthage, Felix, was accused of writing a defamatory letter against the tyrant. Mensurius was said to have concealed his deacon in his house and was summoned to Rome. He was acquitted, but died on his return journey. Before his departure from Africa, he had given the gold and silver ornaments of the church to the care of certain old men, and had also consigned an inventory of these effects to an aged woman, who was to deliver it to the next bishop. Maxentius gave liberty to the Christians, so that it was possible for an election to be held at Carthage. The bishop of Carthage, like the pope, was commonly consecrated by a neighbouring bishop, assisted by a number of others from the vicinity. He was primate not only of the proconsular province, but of the other provinces of North Africa, including Numidian, Byzacene, Tripolitana, and the two Mauretanas, which were all governed by the vicar of prefects. In each of these provinces the local primacy was attached to no town, but was held by the senior bishop, until St. Gregory the Great made the office elective. St. Optatus implies that the bishops of Numidia, many of whom were at no great distance from Carthage, had expected that they would have a voice in the election; but two priests, Botrus and Caelestius, who each expected to be elected, had managed that only a small number of bishops should be present.

Caecilian, the deacon who had been so obnoxious to the martyrs, was duly chosen by the whole people, placed in the chair of Mensurius, and consecrated by Felix, Bishop of Aptonga or Abtughi. The old men who had charge of the treasure of the church were obliged to give it up; they joined with Botrus and Caelestius in refusing to acknowledge the new bishop. They were assisted by a rich lady named Lucilla, who had a grudge against Caecilian because he had rebuked her habit of kissing the bone of an uncanonized (non vindicatus) martyr immediately before receiving Holy Communion. Probably we have here again a martyr whose death was due to his own ill-regulated fervour.

Secundus, as the nearest primate, came with his suffragans to Carthage to judge the affair, and in a great council of seventy bishops declared the ordination of Caecilian to be invalid, as having been performed by a traditor. A new bishop was consecrated. Majorinus, who belonged to the household of Lucilla and had been a lector in the deaconry of Caecilian. That lady provided the sum of 400 folles (more than 11,000 dollars), nominally for the poor; but all of it went into the pockets of the bishops, one-quarter of the sum being seized by Purpurius of Limata. Caecilian had possession of the basilica and the cathedra of Cyprian, and the people were with him, so that he refused to appear before the council. "If I am not properly consecrated", he said ironically, "let them treat me as a deacon, and lay hands on me afresh, and not on another." On this reply being brought, Purpurius cried: "Let him come here, and instead of laying on him, we will break his head in penance." No wonder that the action of this council, which sent letters throughout Africa, had a great influence. But at Carthage it was well known that Caecilian was the choice of the people, and it was not believed that Felix of Aptonga had given up the Sacred Books. Rome and

Italy had given Caecilian their communion. The Church of the moderate Mensurius did not hold that consecration by a traditor was invalid, or even that it was illicit, if the traditor was still in lawful possession of his see. The council of Secundus, on the contrary, declared that a traditor could not act as a bishop, and that any who were in communion with traditors were cut off from the Church. They called themselves the Church of the martyrs, and declared that all who were in communion with public sinners like Caecilian and Felix were necessarily excommunicate.

#### THE CONDEMNATION BY POPE MELCHIADES

Very soon there were many cities having two bishops, the one in communion with Caecilian, the other with Majorinus. Constantine, after defeating Maxentius (28 October, 312) and becoming master of Rome, showed himself a Christian in his acts. He wrote to Anulinus, proconsul of Africa (was he same as the mild proconsul of 303?), restoring the churches to Catholics, and exempting clerics of the "Catholic Church of which Caecilian is president" from civil functions (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* X, v 15, and vii, 2). he also wrote to Caecilian (*ibid.*, X, vi, 1) sending him an order for 3000 folles to be distributed in Africa, Numidia, and Mauretania; if more was needed, the bishop must apply for more. He added that he had heard of turbulent persons who sought to corrupt the Church; he had ordered the proconsul Anulinus, and the vicar of prefects to restrain them, and Caecilian was to appeal to these officials if necessary. The opposing party lost no time. A few days after the publication of these letters, their delegates, accompanied by a mob, brought to Anulinus two bundles of documents, containing the complaints of their party against Caecilian, to be forwarded to the emperor. St. Optatus has preserved a few words from their petition, in which

Constantine is begged to grant judges from Gaul, where under his father's rule there had been no persecution, and therefore no traitors. Constantine knew the Church's constitution too well to comply and thereby make Gallic bishops judges of the primates of Africa. He at once referred the matter to the pope, expressing his intention, laudable, if too sanguine, of allowing no schisms in the Catholic Church. That the African schismatics might have no ground of complaint, he ordered three of the chief bishops of Gaul, Reticus of Autun, Maternus of Cologne, and Marinus of Arles, to repair to Rome, to assist at the trial. He ordered Caecilian to come thither with ten bishops of his accusers and ten of his own communion. The memorials against Caecilian he sent to the pope, who would know, he says, what procedure to employ in order to conclude the whole matter with justice. (Eusebius, Hist. Eccl., X, v, 18). Pope Melchiodorus summoned fifteen Italian bishops to sit with him. From this time forward we find that in all important matters the popes issue their decretal letters from a small council of bishops, and there are traces of this custom even before this. The ten Donatist bishops (for we may now give the party its eventual name) were headed by a Bishop Donatus of Casae Nigrae. It was assumed by Optatus, Augustine, and the other Catholic apologists that this was "Donatus the Great", the successor of Majorinus as schismatic Bishop of Carthage. But the Donatists of St. Augustine's time were anxious to deny this, as they did not wish to admit that their protagonist had been condemned, and the Catholics at the conference of 411 granted them the existence of a Donatus, Bishop of Casae Nigrae, who had distinguished himself by active hostility to Caecilian. Modern authorities agree in accepting this view. But it seems inconceivable that, if Majorinus was still alive, he should not have been obliged to go to Rome. It would be very strange,

further, that a Donatus of Casae Nigrae should appear as the leader of the party, without any explanation, unless Casae Nigrae was simply the birthplace of Donatus the Great. If we assume that Majorinus had died and had been succeeded by Donatus the Great just before the trial at Rome, we shall understand why Majorinus is never again mentioned. The accusations against Caecilian in the memorial were disregarded, as being anonymous and unproved. The witnesses brought from Africa acknowledged that they had nothing against him. Donatus, on the other hand, was convicted by his own confession of having rebaptized and of having laid his hands in penance on bishops - this was forbidden by ecclesiastical law. On the third day the unanimous sentence was pronounced by Melchiades: Caecilian was to be maintained in ecclesiastical communion. If Donatist bishops returned to the Church, in a place where there were two rival bishops, the junior was to retire and be provided with another see. The Donatists were furious. A hundred years later their successor declared that Pope Melchiades was himself a traditor, and that on this account they had not accepted his decision; though there is no trace of this having been alleged at the time. But the nineteen bishops at Rome were contrasted with the seventy bishops of the Cathaginian Council, and a fresh judgment was demanded.

#### THE COUNCIL OF ARLES

Constantine was angry, but he saw that the party was powerful in Africa, and he summoned a council of the whole West (that is, of the whole of his actual dominions) to meet at Arles on 1 August, 314. Melchiades was dead, and his successor, St. Sylvester, thought it unbecoming to leave Rome, thus setting an example which he repeated in the case of Nicaea, and which his successors followed in the cases of Sardica, Rimini, and the Eastern oecumenical councils.

Between forty and fifty sees were represented at the council by bishops or proxies; the Bishops of London, York, and Lincoln were there. St. Sylvester sent legates. The council condemned the Donatists and drew up a number of canons; it reported its proceedings in a letter to the pope, which is extant; but, as in the case of Nicaea, no detailed Acts remain, nor are any such mentioned by the ancients. The Fathers in their letter salute Sylvester, saying that he had rightly decided not to quit the spot "where the Apostles daily sit in judgment"; had he been with them, they might perhaps have dealt more severely with the heretics. Among the canons, one forbids rebaptism (which was still practised in Africa), another declares that those who falsely accuse their brethren shall have communion only at the hour of death. On the other hand, traditors are to be refused communion, but only when their fault has been proved by public official acts; those whom they have ordained are to retain their positions. The council produced some effect in Africa, but the main body of the Donatists was immovable. They appealed from the council to the emperor. Constantine was horrified: "O insolent madness!" he wrote, "they appeal from heaven to earth, from Jesus Christ to a man."

#### THE POLICY OF CONSTANTINE

The emperor retained the Donatist envoys in Gaul, after at first dismissing them. He seems to have thought of sending for Caecilian, then of granting a full examination in Africa. The case of Felix of Aptonga was in fact examined by his order at Carthage in February, 315 (St. Augustine is probably wrong in giving 314). The minutes of the proceedings have come down to us in a mutilated state; they are referred to by St. Optatus, who appended them to his book with other documents, and they are frequently cited by St. Augustine. It was shown that the

letter which the Donatists put forward as proving the crime of Felix, had been interpolated by a certain Ingentius; this was established by the confession of Ingentius, as well as by the witness of Alfius, the writer of the letter. It was proved that Felix was actually absent at the time the search for Sacred Books was made at Aptonga. Constantine eventually summoned Caecilian and his opponents to Rome; but Caecilian, for some unknown reason, did not appear. Caecilian and Donatus the Great (who was now, at all events, bishop) were called to Milan, where Constantine heard both sides with great care. He declared that Caecilian was innocent and an excellent bishop (Augustine, *Contra Cresconium*, III lxxi). He retained both in Italy, however, while he sent two bishops, Eunomius and Olympius, to Africa, with an idea of putting Donatus and Caecilian aside, and substituting a new bishop, to be agreed upon by all parties. It is to be presumed that Caecilian and Donatus had assented to this course; but the violence of the sectaries made it impossible to carry it out. Eunomius and Olympius declared at Carthage that the Catholic Church was that which is diffused throughout the world and that the sentence pronounced against the Donatists could not be annulled. They communicated with the clergy of Caecilian and returned to Italy. Donatus went back to Carthage, and Caecilian, seeing this, felt himself free to do the same. Finally Constantine ordered that the churches which the Donatists had taken should be given to the Catholics. Their other meeting-places were confiscated. Those who were convicted (of calumny?) lost their goods. Evictions were carried out by the military. An ancient sermon on the passion of the Donatist "martyrs", Donatus and Advocatus, describes such scenes. In one of them a regular massacre occurred, and a bishop was among the slain, if we may trust this curious document. The Donatists were proud of this

"persecution of Caecilian", which "the Pure" suffered at the hands of the "Church of the Traditors". The Comes Leontius and the Dux Ursacius were the special objects of their indignation.

In 320 came revelations unpleasant to the "Pure". Nundinarius, a deacon of Cirta, had a quarrel with his bishop, Silvanus, who caused him to be stoned - so he said in his complaint to certain Numidian bishops, in which he threatened that if they did not use their influence in his behalf with Silvanus, he would tell what he knew of them. As he got no satisfaction he brought the matter before Zenophilus, the consular of Numidia. The minutes have come to us in a fragmentary form in the appendix of Optatus, under the title of "Gesta apud Zenophilum". Nundinarius produced letters from Purpurius and other bishops to Silvanus and to the people of Cirta, trying to have peace made with the inconvenient deacon. The minutes of the search at Cirta, which we have already cited, were read and witnesses were called to establish their accuracy, including two of the fossores then present and a lector, Victor the grammarian. It was shown not only that Silvanus was a traditor, but that he had assisted Purpurius, together with two priests and a deacon, in the theft of certain casks of vinegar belonging to the treasury, which were in the temple of Serapis. Silvanus had ordained a priest for the sum of 20 folles (500 to 600 dollars). It was established that none of the money given by Lucilla had reached the poor for whom it was ostensibly given. Thus Silvanus, one of the mainstays of the "Pure" Church, which declared that to communicate with any traditor was to be outside the Church, was himself proved to be a traditor. He was exiled by the consular for robbing the treasury, for obtaining money under false pretences, and for getting himself made bishop by violence. The Donatists later preferred to say

that he was banished for refusing to communicate with the "Caecilianists", and Cresconius even spoke of "the persecution of Zenophilus". But it should have been clear to all that the consecrators of Majorinus had called their opponents traitors in order to cover their own delinquencies.

The Donatist party owed its success in great part to the ability of its leader Donatus, the successor of Majorinus. He appears to have really merited the title of "the Great" by his eloquence and force of character. His writings are lost. His influence with his party was extraordinary. St. Augustine frequently declaims against his arrogance and the impiety with which he was almost worshipped by his followers. In his lifetime he is said to have greatly enjoyed the adulation he received, and after death he was counted as a martyr and miracles were ascribed to him.

In 321 Constantine relaxed his vigorous measures, having found that they did not produce the peace he had hoped for, and he weakly begged the Catholics to suffer the Donatists with patience. This was not easy, for the schismatics broke out into violence. At Circa, Silvanus having returned, they seized the basilica which the emperor had built for the Catholics. They would not give it up, and Constantine found no better expedient than to build another. Throughout Africa, but above all in Numidia, they were numerous. They taught that in all the rest of the world the Catholic Church had perished, through having communicated with the traitor Caecilian; their sect alone was the true Church. If a Catholic came into their churches, they drove him out, and washed with salt the pavement where he had stood. Any Catholic who joined them was forced to be rebaptized. They asserted that their own bishops and ministers were without fault, else their ministrations would be invalid. But in fact they were convicted of drunkenness

and other sins. St. Augustine tells us on the authority of Tichonius that the Donatists held a council of two hundred and seventy bishops in which they discussed for seventy-five days the question of rebaptism; they finally decided that in cases where traditors refused to be rebaptized they should be communicated with in spite of this; and the Donatist bishops of Mauretania did not rebaptize traditors until the time of Macarius. Outside Africa the Donatists had a bishop residing on the property of an adherent in Spain, and at an early period of the schism they made a bishop for their small congregation in Rome, which met, it seems, on a hill outside the city, and had the name of "Montenses". This antipapal "succession with a beginning" was frequently ridiculed by Catholic writers. The series included Felix, Boniface, Encolpius, Macrobius (c. 370), Lucian, Claudian (c. 378), and again Felix in 411.

#### THE CIRCUMCELLIONS

The date of the first appearance of the Circumcellions is uncertain, but probably they began before the death of Constantine. They were mostly rustic enthusiasts, who knew no Latin, but spoke Punic; it has been suggested that they may have been of Berber blood. They joined the ranks of the Donatists, and were called by them agnostici and "soldiers of Christ", but in fact were brigands. Troops of them were to be met in all parts of Africa. They had no regular occupation, but ran about armed, like madmen. They used no swords, on the ground that St. Peter had been told to put his sword into its sheath; but they did continual acts of violence with clubs, which they called "Israelites". They bruised their victims without killing them, and left them to die. In St. Augustine's time, however, they took to swords and all sorts of weapons; they rushed about accompanied by unmarried women, played, and drank. They battle-cry

was Deo laudes, and no bandits were more terrible to meet. They frequently sought death, counting suicide as martyrdom. They were especially fond of flinging themselves from precipices; more rarely they sprang into the water or fire. Even women caught the infection, and those who had sinned would cast themselves from the cliffs, to atone for their fault. Sometimes the Circumcellions sought death at the hands of others, either by paying men to kill them, by threatening to kill a passer-by if he would not kill them, or by their violence inducing magistrates to have them executed. While paganism still flourished, they would come in vast crowds to any great sacrifice, not to destroy the idols, but to be martyred. Theodoret says a Circumcellion was accustomed to announce his intention of becoming a martyr long before the time, in order to be well treated and fed like a beast for slaughter. He relates an amusing story (Haer. Fab., IV, vi) to which St. Augustine also refers. A number of these fanatics, fattened like pheasants, met a young man and offered him a drawn sword to smite them with, threatening to murder him if he refused. He pretended to fear that when he had killed a few, the rest might change their minds and avenge the deaths of their fellows; and he insisted that they must all be bound. They agreed to this; when they were defenceless, the young man gave each of them a beating and went his way.

When in controversy with Catholics, the Donatist bishops were not proud of their supporters. They declared that self-precipitation from a cliff had been forbidden in the councils. Yet the bodies of these suicides were sacrilegiously honoured, and crowds celebrated their anniversaries. Their bishops could not but conform, and they were often glad enough of the strong arms of the Circumcellions. Theodoret, soon after St. Augustine's death, knew of no other

Donatists than the Circumcellions; and these were the typical Donatists in the eyes of all outside Africa. They were especially dangerous to the Catholic clergy, whose houses they attacked and pillaged. They beat and wounded them, put lime and vinegar on their eyes, and even forced them to be rebaptized. Under Axidus and Fasir, "the leaders of the Saints" in Numidia, property and roads were unsafe, debtors were protected, slaves were set in their masters' carriages, and the masters made to run before them. At length, the Donatist bishops invited a general named Taurinus to repress these extravagances. He met with resistance in a place named Octava, and the altars and tablets to be seen there in St. Optatus's time testified to the veneration given to the Circumcellions who were slain; but their bishops denied them the honour due to martyrs. It seems that in 336-7 the proefectus proetorio of Italy, Gregory took some measures against the Donatists, for St. Optatus tells us that Donatus wrote him a letter beginning: "Gregory, stain on the senate and disgrace to the prefects".

#### THE "PERSECUTION" OF MACARIUS

When Constantine became master of the East by defeating Licinius in 323, he was prevented by the rise of Arianism in the East from sending, as he had hoped, Eastern bishops to Africa, to adjust the differences between the Donatists and the Catholics. Caecilian of Carthage was present at the Council of Nicea in 325, and his successor, Gratus, was at that of Sardica in 342. The conciliabulum of the Easterns on that occasion wrote a letter to Donatus, as though he were the true Bishop of Carthage; but the Arians failed to gain the support of the Donatists, who looked upon the whole East as cut off from the Church, which survived in Africa alone. The Emperor Constans was as anxious as his father to

give peace to Africa. In 347 he sent thither two commissioners, Paulus and Macarius, with large sums of money for distribution. Donatus naturally saw in this an attempt to win over his adherents to the Church by bribery; he received the envoys with insolence: "What has the emperor to do with the Church?" said he, and he forbade his people to accept any largess from Constans. In most parts, however, the friendly mission seems to have been not unfavourably received. But at Bagai in Numidia the bishop, Donatus, assembled the Circumcellions of the neighbourhood, who had already been excited by their bishops. Macarius was obliged to ask for the protection of the military. The Circumcellions attacked them, and killed two or three soldiers; the troops then became uncontrollable, and slew some of the Donatists. This unfortunate incident was thereafter continually thrown in the teeth of the Catholics, and they were nicknamed Macarians by the Donatists, who declared that Donatus of Bagai had been precipitated from a rock, and that another bishop, Marculus, had been thrown into a well. The existing Acts of two other Donatist martyrs of 347, Maximian and Isaac, are preserved; they apparently belong to Carthage, and are attributed by Harnack to the Antipope Macrobius. It seems that after violence had begun, the envoys ordered the Donatists to unite with the Church whether they willed or no. Many of the bishops took flight with their partisans; a few joined the Catholics; the rest were banished. Donatus the Great died in exile. A Donatist named Vitellius composed a book to show that the servants of God are hated by the world.

A solemn Mass was celebrated in each place where the union was completed, and the Donatists set about a rumour that images (obviously of the emperor) were to be placed in the altar and worshipped. As nothing of the sort was found to be

done, and as the envoys merely made a speech in favour of unity, it seems that the reunion was effected with less violence than might have been expected. The Catholics and their bishops praised God for the peace that ensued, though they declared that they had no responsibility for the action of Paulus and Macarius. In the following year Gratus, the Catholic Bishop of Carthage, held a council, in which the reiteration of baptism was forbidden, while, to please the rallied Donatists, traitors were condemned anew. It was forbidden to honour suicides as martyrs.

#### THE RESTORATION OF DONATISM BY JULIAN

The peace was happy for Africa, and the forcible means by which it was obtained were justified by the violence of the sectaries. But the accession of Julian the Apostate in 361 changed the face of affairs. Delighted to throw Christianity into confusion, Julian allowed the Catholic bishops who had been exiled by Constantius to return to the sees which the Arians were occupying. The Donatists, who had been banished by Constantius, were similarly allowed to return at their own petition, and received back their basilicas. Scenes of violence were the result of this policy both in the East and the West. "Your fury", wrote St. Optatus, "returned to Africa at the same moment that the devil was set free", for the same emperor restored supremacy to paganism and the Donatists to Africa. The decree of Julian was considered so discreditable to them, that the Emperor Honorius in 405 had it posted up throughout Africa for their shame. St. Optatus gives a vehement catalogue of the excesses committed by the Donatists on their return. They invaded the basilicas with arms; they committed so many murders that a report of them was sent to the emperor. Under the orders of two bishops, a party attacked the basilica of Lemellef; they stripped off the roof,

pelted with tiles the deacons who were round the altar, and killed two of them.

In Mauretania riots signaled the return of the Donatists. In Numidia two bishops availed themselves of the complaisance of the magistrates to throw a peaceful population into confusion, expelling the faithful, wounding the men, and not sparing the women and children. Since they did not admit the validity of the sacraments administered by traditors, when they seized the churches they cast the Holy Eucharist to the dogs; but the dogs, inflamed with madness, attacked their own masters. An ampulla of chrism thrown out of a window was found unbroken on the rocks. Two bishops were guilty of rape; one of these seized the aged Catholic bishop and condemned him to public penance. All Catholics whom they could force to join their party were made penitents, even clerics of every rank, and children, contrary to the law of the Church. some for a year, some for a month, some but for a day. In taking possession of a basilica, they destroyed the altar, or removed it, or at least scraped the surface. They sometimes broke up the chalices, and sold the materials. They washed pavements, walls, and columns. Not content with recovering their churches, they employed pagan functionaries to obtain for them possession of the sacred vessels, furniture, altar-linen, and especially the books (how did they purify the book? asks St. Optatus), sometimes leaving the Catholic congregation with no books at all. The cemeteries were closed to the Catholic dead.

The revolt of Firmus, a Mauretanian chieftain who defied the Roman power and eventually assumed the style of emperor (366-72), was undoubtedly supported by many Donatists. The imperial laws against them were strengthened by Valentinian in 373 and by Gratian, who wrote in 377 to the vicar of prefects, Flavian (himself a Donatist), ordering all the basilicas of the schismatics to be given

up to the Catholics. St. Augustine shows that even the churches which the Donatists themselves had built were included. The same emperor required Claudian, the Donatist bishop at Rome, to return to Africa; as he refused to obey, a Roman council had him driven a hundred miles from the city. It is probable that the Catholic Bishop of Carthage, Genethlius, caused the laws to be mildly administered in Africa.

#### ST. OPTATUS

The Catholic champion, St. Optatus, Bishop of Milevis, published his great work "De schismate Donatistarum" in answer to that of the Donatist Bishop of Carthage, Parmenianus, under Valentinian and Valens, 364-375 (so St. Jerome). 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 (he means the persecution of 303). 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. In the first book he describes the origin and growth of the schism; in the second he shows the notes of the true Church; in the third he defends the Catholics from the charge of persecuting, with especial reference to the days of Macarius. In the fourth book he refutes Parmenianus's proofs from Scripture that the sacrifice of a sinner is polluted. In the fifth book he shows the validity of baptism even when conferred by sinners, for it is conferred by Christ, the minister being the instrument only. This is the first important statement of the doctrine that the grace of the sacraments is derived from the opus operatum of Christ independently of the worthiness of the minister. In the sixth book he describes the violence of the Donatists and the sacrilegious way in which they had treated Catholic altars. In

the seventh book he treats chiefly of unity and of reunion, and returns to the subject of Macarius.

He calls Parmenianus "brother", and wishes to treat the Donatists as brethren, since they were not heretics. Like some other Fathers, he holds that only pagans and heretics go to hell; schismatics and all Catholics will eventually be saved after a necessary purgatory. This is the more curious, because before him and after him in Africa Cyprian and Augustine both taught that schism is as bad as heresy, if not worse. St. Optatus was much venerated by St. Augustine and later by St. Fulgentius. He writes with vehemence, sometimes with violence, in spite of his protestations of friendliness; but he is carried away by his indignation. His style is forcible and effective, often concise and epigrammatic. To this work he appended a collection of documents containing the evidence for the history he had related. This dossier had certainly been formed much earlier, at all events before the peace of 347, and not long after the latest document it contains, which is dated Feb., 330; the rest are not later than 321, and may possibly have been put together as early as that year. Unfortunately these important historical testimonies have come down to us only in a single mutilated manuscript, the archetype of which was also incomplete. The collection was freely used at the conference of 411 and is often quoted at some length by St. Augustine, who has preserved many interesting portions which would otherwise be unknown to us.

#### THE MAXIMIANISTS

Before Augustine took up the mantle of Optatus together with a double portion of his spirit, the Catholics had gained new and victorious arguments from the divisions among the Donatists themselves. Like so many other schisms, this

schism bred schisms within itself. In Mauretania and Numidia these separated sects were so numerous that the Donatists themselves could not name them all. We hear of Urbanists; of Claudianists, who were reconciled to the main body by Primianus of Carthage; of Rogatists, a Mauretanian sect, of mild character, because no Circumcellion belonged to it; the Rogatists were severely punished whenever the Donatists could induce the magistrates to do so, and were also persecuted by Optatus of Timgad. But the most famous sectaries were the Maximianists, for the story of their separation from the Donatists reproduces with strange exactitude that of the withdrawal of the Donatists themselves from the communion of the Church; and the conduct of the Donatists towards them was so inconsistent with their avowed principles, that it became in the skilled hands of Augustine the most effective weapon of all his controversial armoury. Primianus, Donatist Bishop of Carthage, excommunicated the deacon Maximianus. The latter (who was, like Majorinus, supported by a lady) got together a council of forty-three bishops, who summoned Primianus to appear before them. The primate refused, insulted their envoys, tried to have them prevented from celebrating the Sacred Mysteries, and had stones thrown at them in the street. The council summoned him before a greater council, which met to the number of a hundred bishops at Cebarsussum in June, 393. Primianus was deposed; all clerics were to leave his communion within eight days; if they should delay till after Christmas, they would not be permitted to return to the Church even after penance; the laity were allowed until the following Easter, under the same penalty. A new bishop of Carthage was appointed in the person of Maximian himself, and was consecrated by twelve bishops. The partisans of Primianus were rebaptized, if they had been baptized after the permitted delay. Primianus stood

out, and demanded to be judged by a Numidian council; three hundred and ten bishops met at Bagai in April, 394; the primate did not take the place of an accused person, but himself presided. He was of course acquitted, and the Maximianists were condemned without a hearing. All but the twelve consecrators and their abettors among the clergy of Carthage were given till Christmas to return; after this period they would be obliged to do penance. This decree, composed in eloquent style by Emeritus of Caesarea, and adopted by acclamation, made the Donatists hence-forward ridiculous through their having readmitted schismatics without penance. Maximian's church was razed to the ground, and after the term of grace had elapsed, the Donatists persecuted the unfortunate Maximianists, representing themselves as Catholics, and demanding that the magistrates should enforce against the new sectaries the very laws which Catholics emperors had drawn up against Donatism. Their influence enabled them to do this, for they were still far more numerous than the Catholics, and the magistrates must often have been of their party. In the reception of those who returned from the party of Maximian they were yet more fatally inconsequent. The rule was theoretically adhered to that all who had been baptized in the schism must be rebaptized; but if a bishop returned, he and his whole flock were admitted without rebaptism. This was allowed even in the case of two of the consecrators of Maximian, Praetextatus of Assur and Felixianus of Musti, after the proconsul had vainly tried to expel them from their sees, and although a Donatist bishop, Rogatus, had already been appointed at Assur. In another case the party of Primianus was more consistent. Salvius, the Maximianist Bishop of Membresa, was another of the consecrators. He was twice summoned by the proconsul to retire in favour of the Primianist Restitutus. As he was much

respected by the people of Membresa, a mob was brought over from the neighbouring town of Abitene to expel him; the aged bishop was beaten, and made to dance with dead dogs tied around his neck. But his people built him a new church, and three bishops coexisted in this small town, a Maximianist, a Primianist, and a Catholic.

The leader of the Donatists at this time was Optatus, Bishop of Thamugadi (Timgad), called Gildonianus, from his friendship with Gildo, the Count of Africa (386-397). For ten years Optatus, supported by Gildo, was the tyrant of Africa. He persecuted the Rogatists and Maximianists, and he used troops against the Catholics. St. Augustine tells us that his vices and cruelties were beyond description; but they had at least the effect of disgracing the cause of the Donatists, for though he was hated throughout Africa for his wickedness and his evil deeds, yet the Puritan faction remained always in full communion with this bishop, who was a robber, a ravisher, an oppressor, a traitor, and a monster of cruelty. When Gildo fell in 397, after having made himself master of Africa for a few months, Optatus was thrown into a prison, in which he died.

#### SAINT AUGUSTINE

St. Augustine began his victorious campaign against Donatism soon after he was ordained priest in 391. His popular psalm or "Abecedarium" against the Donatists was intended to make known to the people the arguments set forth by St. 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 St. 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 important were his seven books on baptism, in which, after developing the principle already laid down by St. Optatus, that the effect of the sacrament is independent of the holiness of the minister, he shows in great detail that the authority of St. 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. St. 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. Before this last book he published his "De Unitate ecclesiae" about 403. To these works must be added some sermons and some letters which are real treatises.

The arguments used by St. Augustine against Donatism fall under three heads. First we have the historical proofs of the regularity of Caecilian's consecration, of the innocence of Felix of Aptonga, of the guilt of the founders of the "Pure" Church, also the judgment given by pope, council, and emperor, the true history of Macarius, the barbarous behaviour of the Donatists under Julian, the violence of the Circumcellions, and so forth. Second, there are the doctrinal arguments: the proofs from the Old and New Testaments that the Church is Catholic, diffused throughout the world, and necessarily one and united; appeal is made to the See of Rome, where the succession of bishops is uninterrupted from St. Peter himself; St. Augustine borrows his list of popes from St. Optatus (Ep. li), and in his psalm crystallizes the argument into the famous phrase: "That is the rock against which the proud gates of hell do not prevail." A further appeal is to the Eastern Church, and especially to the

Apostolic Churches to which St. Peter, St. Paul, and St. John addressed epistles - they were not in communion with the Donatists. The validity of baptism conferred by heretics, the impiety of rebaptizing, are important points. All these arguments were found in St. Optatus. Peculiar to St. Augustine is the necessity of defending St. Cyprian, and the third category is wholly his own. The third division comprises the argumentum ad hominem drawn from the inconsistency of the Donatists themselves: Secundus had pardoned the traditors; full fellowship was accorded to malefactors like Optatus Gildonianus and the Circumcellions; Tichonius turned against his own party; Maximian had divided from Primatus just as Majorinus from Caecilian; the Maximianists had been readmitted without rebaptism.

This last method of argument was found to be of great practical value, and many conversions were now taking place, largely on account of the false position in which the Donatists had placed themselves. This point had been especially emphasized by the Council of Carthage of Sept., 401, which had ordered information as to the treatment of the Maximianists to be gathered from magistrates. The same synod restored the earlier rule, long since abolished, that Donatist bishops and clergy should retain their rank if they returned to the Church. Pope Anastasius I wrote to the council urging the importance of the Donatist question. Another council in 403 organized public disputations with the Donatists. This energetic action roused the Circumcellions to new violence. The life of St. Augustine was endangered. His future biographer, St. Possidius of Calama, was insulted and ill-treated by a party led by a Donatist priest, Crispinus. The latter's bishop, also named Crispinus, was tried at Carthage and fined ten pounds of gold as a heretic, though the fine was remitted by

Possidius. This is the first case known to us in which a Donatist is declared a heretic, but henceforth it is the common style for them. The cruel and disgusting treatment of Maximianus, Bishop of Bagai, is also related by St. Augustine in detail. The Emperor Honorius was induced by the Catholics to renew the old laws against the Donatists at the beginning of 405. Some good resulted, but the Circumcellions of Hippo were excited to new violence. The letter of Petilianus was defended by a grammarian named Cresconius, against whom St. Augustine published a reply in four books. The third and fourth books are especially important, as in these he argues from the Donatists' treatment of the Maximianists, quotes the Acts of the Council of Circa held by Secundus, and cites other important documents. The saint also replied to a pamphlet by Petilianus, "De unico baptisate".

#### THE "COLLATIO" OF 411

St. Augustine had once hoped to conciliate the Donatists by reason only. The violence of the Circumcellions, the cruelties of Optatus of Thamugadi, the more recent attacks on Catholic bishops had all given proof that repression by the secular arm was absolutely unavoidable. It was not necessarily a case of persecution for religious opinions, but simply one of the protection of life and property and the ensuring of freedom and safety for Catholics. Nevertheless the laws went much further than this. Those of Honorius were promulgated anew in 408 and 410. In 411 the method of disputation was organized on a grand scale by order of the emperor himself at the request of the Catholic bishops. Their case was now complete and unanswerable. But this was to be brought home to the people of Africa, and public opinion was to be forced to recognize the facts, by a public exposure of the weakness of the separatist position. The emperor sent an

official named Marcellinus, an excellent Christian, to preside as cognitor at the conference. He issued a proclamation declaring that he would exercise absolute impartiality in his conduct of the proceedings and in his final judgment. The Donatist bishops who should come to the conference were to receive back for the present the basilicas which had been taken from them. The number of those who arrived at Carthage was very large, though somewhat less than the two hundred and seventy-nine whose signatures were appended to a letter to the president. The Catholic bishops numbered two hundred and eighty-six. Marcellinus decided that each party should elect seven disputants, who alone should speak, seven advisers whom they might consult, and four secretaries to keep the records. Thus only thirty-six bishops would be present in all. The Donatists pretended that this was a device to prevent their great numbers being known; but the Catholics did not object to all of them being present, provided no disturbance was caused.

The chief Catholic speaker, besides the amiable and venerable Bishop of Carthage, Aurelius, was of course Augustine, whose fame had already spread through the whole Church. His friend, Alypius of Tagaste, and his disciple and biographer, Possidius, were also among the seven. The principal Donatist speakers were Emeritus of Caesarea in Mauretania (Cherchel) and Petilianus of Constantine (Cirta); the latter spoke or interrupted about a hundred and fifty times, until on the third day he was so hoarse that he had to desist. The Catholics made a generous proposal that any Donatist bishop who should join the Church, should preside alternately with the Catholic bishop in the episcopal chair, unless the people should object, in which case both must resign and a new election be made. The conference was held on the 1, 3, and 8 June. The policy of

the Donatists was to raise technical objections, to cause delay, and by all manner of means to prevent the Catholic disputants from stating their case. The Catholic case was, however, clearly enunciated on the first day in letters which were read, addressed by the Catholic bishops to Marcellinus and to their deputies to instruct them in the procedure. A discussion of important points was arrived at only on the third day, amid many interruptions. It was then evident that the unwillingness of the Donatists to have a real discussion was due to the fact that they could not reply to the arguments and documents brought forward by the Catholics. The insincerity as well as the inconsequence and clumsiness of the sectaries did them great harm. The main doctrinal points and historical proofs of the Catholics were made perfectly plain. The cognitor summed up in favor of the Catholic bishops. The churches which had been provisionally restored to the Donatists were to be given up; their assemblies were forbidden under grave penalties. The lands of those who permitted Circumcellions on their property were to be confiscated. The minutes of this great conference were submitted to all the speakers for their approval, and the report of each speech (mostly only a single sentence) was signed by the speaker as a guarantee of its accuracy. We possess these manuscripts in full only as far as the middle of the third day; for the rest only the headings of each little speech are preserved. These headings were composed by order of Marcellinus in order to facilitate reference. On account of the dullness and a length of the full report, St. Augustine composed a popular resume of the discussions in his "Breviculus Collationis", and went with more detail into a few points in a final pamphlet, "Ad Donatistas post Collationem".

On 30 Jan., 412, Honorius issued a final law against the Donatists, renewing old

legislation and adding a scale of fines for Donatist clergy, and for the laity and their wives: the illustres were to pay fifty pounds of gold, the spectabiles forty, the senatores and sacerdotales thirty, the clarissimi and principales twenty, the decuriones, negotiatores, and plebeii five, which Circumcellions were to pay ten pounds of silver. Slaves were to be reproved by their masters, coloni were to be constrained by repeated beatings. All bishops and clerics were exiled from Africa. In 414 the fines were increased for those of high rank: a proconsul, vicar, or count was fined two hundred pounds of gold, and a senator a hundred. A further law was published in 428. The good Marcellinus, who had become the friend of St. Augustine, fell a victim (it is supposed) to the rancour of the Donatists; for he was put to death in 413, as though an accomplice in the revolt of Heraclius, Count of Africa, in spite of the orders of the emperor, who did not believe him guilty. Donatism was now discredited by the conference and proscribed by the persecuting laws of Honorius. The Circumcellions made some dying efforts, and a priest was killed by them at Hippo. It does not seem that the decrees were rigidly carried out, for the Donatist clergy was still found in Africa. The ingenious Emeritus was at Caesarea in 418, and at the wish of Pope Zosimus St. Augustine had a conference with him, without result. But on the whole Donatism was dead. Even before the conference the Catholic Bishops in Africa were considerably more numerous than the Donatists, except in Numidia. From the time of the invasion of the Vandals in 430 little is heard of them until the days of St. Gregory the Great, when they seem to have revived somewhat, for the pope complained to the Emperor Maurice that the laws were not strictly enforced. They finally disappeared with the irruptions of the Saracens.

## DONATIST WRITERS

There seems to have been no lack of literary activity among the Donatists of the fourth century, though little remains to us. The works of Donatus the Great were known to St. Jerome, but have not been preserved. His book on the Holy Spirit is said by that Father to have been Arian in doctrine. It is possible that the Pseudo-Cyprianic "De singularitate clericorum" is by Macrobius; and the "Adversus aleatores" is by an antipope, either Donatist or Novatianist. The arguments of Parmenianus and Cresconius are known to us, though their works are lost; but Monceaux has been able to restore from St. Augustine's citations short works by Petilianus of Constantine and Gaudentius of Thamugadi, and also a libellus by a certain Fulgentius, from the citations in the Pseudo-Augustinian "Contra Fulgentium Donatistam". Of Tichonius, or Tyconius, we still possess the treatise "De Septem regulis" (P.L., XVIII; new ed. by Professor Burkitt, in Cambridge "Texts and Studies", III, 1, 1894) on the interpretation of Holy Scripture. His commentary on the Apocalypse is lost; it was used by Jerome, Primasius, and Beatus in their commentaries on the same book. Tichonius is chiefly celebrated for his views on the Church, which were quite inconsistent with Donatism, and which Parmenianus tried to refute. In the famous words of St. Augustine (who often refers to his illogical position and to the force with which he argued against the cardinal tenets of his own sect): "Tichonius assailed on all sides by the voices of the holy pages, awoke and saw the Church of God diffused throughout the world, as had been foreseen and foretold of her so long before by the hearts and mouths of the saints. And seeing this, he undertook to demonstrate and assert against his own party that no sin of man, however villainous and monstrous, can interfere with the promises of God, nor

can any impiety of any persons within the Church cause the word of God to be made void as to the existence and diffusion of the Church to the ends of the earth, which was promised to the Fathers and now is manifest" (Contra Ep. Parmen., I, i).

JOHN CHAPMAN

Transcribed by Anthony A. Killeen

Aeterna non caduca

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