

Augustine's Polemics against the Puritanical claim of the Donatists: A Springboard for the Development of Sacramental Theology

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Abstract

The life of the priest has always carried with it an aura of dignity, holiness and a sense of the sacred. Hence, it is not surprising that the office of the priest comes with a lot of expectations, especially from those who look up to the priest as a model since he acts in *persona Christi*. This expectation has gotten to the extent that the lay faithful at times link the life of the priest and the validity of the sacraments that he administers. It is against this backdrop that this article centres on the life of the priest as the minister of the sacraments in relation to the sacraments he administers. Specifically, focusing on the worthiness of the priests and the validity of the sacraments he administers. It is however very pertinent to state that this will be seen in the light of the Donatists' controversy that served as a springboard for the development of the Catholic Church's Sacramental Theology. This upheaval started as an accusation of Church leaders for handing over Sacred Books by some Church leaders during the persecution of Diocletian (303-305). The handing over of the Scripture and Liturgical books was seen by the Donatists as a denial or betrayal of the faith. This controversy later included the moral life of the priest in relation to the sacrament he administers. In defence of such heretical teaching, we shall see how Augustine debunked the erroneous teaching of the Donatist as regards sacramental validity concerning the "worthiness" or the "unworthiness" of the life of the priest who administers the sacraments of the Church. Lastly, employing the descriptive and analytical methods of research, this write-up exposes how the official teaching of the Church came about.

Key words: Donatism, *Traditio*, *Traditores*, *tradere*, Sacrament, validity, efficacy, *potestas*, heresy, schism.

Introduction

The Church, *ab initio*, faced a lot of opposition, challenges, difficulties, disagreements and divisions that not only helped her to define her doctrines with precision but also helped her to come out stronger and better. In other words, heretics and their heresies helped the Church to clarify her teachings as it is obvious that most of the Church's dogmas and doctrines are a product of the Church's defence of her teachings against the threat posed by her unfaithful

children. Similarly, the Donatist controversy was not an exception, as it helped the Church to clarify its teaching on Sacramental Theology. This is because the person of the minister of the sacrament was at the centre of this controversy, as the validity or invalidity of the sacrament was seen to depend on the worthiness or unworthiness of the minister.

Therefore, this article attempts to respond to questions like: Can a priest in a state of mortal sin or who is not in a state of grace, administer a valid sacrament? Does the validity or invalidity of the sacrament depend on the worthiness or unworthiness of the priest? Is it Christ who gives the grace or the priest? Can the grace be received by the recipient even if the priest is unworthy?

Definition of Terms

There is a need to define some key terms to put us in the picture of the Donatist controversy.

(i) Traditio

According to the Oxford Latin Dictionary, the word *traditio* was derived from the word '*tradere*', which means to hand over, pass over or surrender something or a person to an enemy or an opponent. The root of the word, *tradere*, meant to hand over physical objects and that is what the original North African *traditores* did.

(ii) Traditor/traditores

Following the aforementioned definition of *Traditio*, *Traditor/traditores* simply means those who are deserted to the side of the enemy, handing over (*tradere*) themselves and, often, state secrets to the opposition. In the context of the Donatist controversy, it bears even more weight, it means those Christians who left the true (in Donatist eyes) church and became members of the church affiliated with the Empire. But it meant even more. In other words, when Roman soldiers came calling during the persecutions, ecclesiastical officials handed over (*tradere*) sacred books, vessels, and other church goods, rather than risk legal penalties (Tilley, 1996).

In the context of the Donatist controversy, the term *traditores* was applied not only to the persons who engaged in these acts but also to their ecclesiastical descendants, generation after generation, i.e., the persons they ordained. Hence, they were not only *traditores* but members of the church of the *traditores*, the Catholic Church (*Ibid*).

(iii) Potestas

The term *potestas* derives from the Latin verb *potere*, which simply means power or efficacy.

The Donatist Controversy: A Background

The Donatists upheaval was a fourth-century heresy that divided the Church in

North Africa. This controversy started with the Diocletian persecutions adjudged to be the severest as it was targeted not only at religious leaders but also at scriptures and liturgical objects. Because of the severity of this persecution, some fled and others willingly handed over scriptures and liturgical objects to avoid being persecuted. However, others did not compromise their faith and were persecuted. These persecutions, as described by Fend (1985), made many martyrs and many apostates (saints and sinners).

However, the end of the Diocletian's persecution did not bring peace to the Church in Africa. The following years were marked by disputes between those who had left the Church in the time of danger and who now wanted to return, and those who stigmatized such persons as *traditores* ("traitors") – because of their willingness to "hand over" (*tradere, traditio*) scriptures and liturgical objects – and who insisted that they undergo penance and re-baptism before being readmitted into the Christian community (Evers, 2012). According to Dodaro (2010), Donatism was a puritanical movement with the sole aim of establishing a church of the pure. The Donatists were concerned about the purity of their members, but more importantly to establish a Church of the pure devoid of impurity - a church of the saints and not of sinners. As an approach, they settled for the pharisaic or holier than thou approach as they saw themselves as distinct from others in terms of the holiness of life. Of paramount importance was the accent placed on the purity or holiness of their ministers. It would be nice to discuss their idea of the Church of the Pure and their sacramental theology as they occupy centre stage in this write-up.

The Donatists' Idea of the "Church of the Pure" and their Sacramental Theology

The "Church of the Pure"

This section explains the Donatists' impression of themselves and reveals their holier-than-thou attitude. First and foremost, they conceived of the Church in the terms described by Paul in Ephesians 5:27, "a Church without stain or wrinkle", and they saw themselves in this description. By this they meant that the Church in its present historical condition was holy because all her members were holy, *id est*, free of serious sin. In other words, they saw themselves as the remnant of a once vast, international Church that had lost its soul through the corruption of its priests (*cf.* Dodaro, 2010). They believed it was their mission to safeguard this remnant from contamination with the scandal of clerical betrayal that had so corroded the holiness of the Catholic Church that not only was it no longer capable of sustaining the true faith, but it also destroyed the spiritual life of all those who still came into contact with it with the same sin and scandal.

Besides, the Donatists also saw themselves as the "church of the martyrs", as the Church that stood in continuity with those Christians who had remained faithful during Roman persecution. Their Church had been purified by that persecution. To sustain the faith of their fathers, Donatists had to ensure that all

their members became and remained holy throughout their lives. In their view, the "Catholic" Church had long ago betrayed itself and become indistinguishable from the pagan, sinful world. Donatists felt threatened by this world. They trusted that their sacraments and their priests alone would ward off the sin that had destroyed the rest of the Church (*ibid*).

Donatists' Claim and Its Implication for Sacramental Theology

In discussing the Donatists' Sacramental Theology, two things are of paramount importance:

- i. The way that a sacrament is communicated between the minister and the recipient.
- ii. Impediments on the side of the minister.

(a) The Administration of the Sacrament

For the Donatist, it is pertinent to make the point that the dispensation of sacraments centres on the purity or holiness of the minister. For them, therefore, sacramental validity depends on a material exchange or mediation between the priest and the recipient. For instance, in the case of baptism, the priest transfers his holiness to the recipient, as it were, cleansing the recipient's conscience with his clean conscience. Similarly, a priest with a bad conscience transfers to the recipient his guilt, which he inherits from his Church. Hence, the Donatist way of thinking establishes a concrete bond between the priest and the recipient of the sacrament that makes the layperson's spiritual growth dependent on the priest. To understand their position, it is pertinent to quote one of their bishops, named, Petilian of Constantine, who conceived the function of the priests to be efficacious only if their consciences were clean. This he expresses thus:

If you make a prayer to God or utter supplication, it profits you absolutely nothing whatsoever. For your blood-stained conscience makes your feeble prayers of no effect; because the Lord God regards purity of conscience more than the words of supplication, according to the saying of the Lord Christ, "Not everyone that says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Petilian as quoted at Augustine, *c. litt. pet.* 2, 121; see also Dodaro, 2010).

From the above quotation, Petilian simply says that when priests pray on behalf of the laity, God is more concerned with the priests' consciences than with the wording of their prayers. From the Donatists' point of view, it, therefore, goes without saying, that the sins of a minister affect what he does. In other words, his sins affect the validity of the sacraments he administers. With particular reference to the sacrament of baptism, Petilian further buttresses his position by seeing the validity or invalidity of the sacrament of baptism in terms of how clean or unclean the conscience of the minister is. He says: "The conscience of him who gives in holiness is what we look for to cleanse the conscience of the

recipient" (Petilian as quoted by Augustine, *c. litt. Pet.* 3, 18). Thus, Petilian simply claims that what cleanses the conscience of the recipient of baptism is the clean conscience of the minister (Dodaro 2010).

(b) Impediments on the side of the Minister

This point about impediment throws more light on the above point on the conscience of the minister. Using the statements of Petilian above he seems to say that there are two kinds of sin ecclesial and personal. The first as we shall see concerns sins inherited from those who were guilty of the sin of *traditio*, *id est*, those who not only fled but also handed over Scripture and liturgical objects during Diocletian's persecution. For them, the implication is that those they ordained, and those who received sacraments from them received those sacraments invalidly. And more importantly, the Donatists were of the view that such sins affected the Catholic Church forever. The second concerns other sins committed by the minister which questions their moral credibility. Let us now delve into the two:

i. Ecclesial sins

Ecclesial sins such as *traditio* and heresy, according to Petilian are few but deadly to the Church, because according to him, they sap the Church of its holiness. Hence the Donatists claim that this is what happened to the Catholic Church, not only in Africa but throughout the world. In effect, by being in communion with those Catholic bishops who sinned *traditio* during the Diocletian persecution, the Catholic Church throughout the world was forever contaminated by the sin of a relatively small number of bishops. Thus, even one hundred years later, Catholic bishops and priests remain the heirs of that sin and scandal, and their holy orders and the sacraments they administer are thus null and void.

ii. Personal sins

This portion calls to mind the Donatists' idea or conception of the Church as that of the pure whose ministers have not only been purified by persecution but who also are moral beacons who are free from the corruption of the world. When we align this idea of purity of its members with their idea of a sacrament as the transfer of the priest's holiness to the laity, it becomes even clearer that Donatist theology is obsessed with holiness in a visible and tangible form since it places a high stake in the appearance of holiness in its members. To this end, laypeople yearn to see holiness reflected in their clergy. The role of the clergy is to mirror the Church's ideal of holiness. The implication of this submission by the Donatists is that, in looking at the clergy, the laity should, in the words of Dodaro (2010), expect to see holy men, heroes of virtue, or at the very best – men who are free of sin. For the laity, therefore, the Church's holiness takes bodily, personal form in bishops and priests. So long as the clergy appears holy, the laity can be certain that their Church is holy, and that, as long as they remain in the Church, they are safe from the world.

Augustine's Response

In the early stage of his ministry as a priest and eventually as a bishop, Augustine was confronted with this crisis or controversy (Tilley, 1999). In the years after his consecration as bishop of Hippo i.e. in the year 395, Augustine gradually stepped up his polemical production against the Donatists, both in sermons and in treatises (Evers, 2012). "Augustine supported various strategies, at different times, for dealing with it. These included writing theological treatises, preaching sermons, supporting state repression, calling an ecclesiastical conference and affirming repentant Donatists. In all of these endeavours, Augustine sought to impose order on a disunited church" (Sanlon, 2014). The seriousness of the problem is seen in Augustine's employment of several means (such as sermons, letters, treatises, debates and so on) in dealing with this problem which was a threat to the unity of the church in North Africa. This controversy which started as far back as the time of the "Great Persecution" carried out by Diocletian lasted almost the whole period of his ministry.

According to Eno (1999), Augustine's polemic against the Donatists was greatly influenced by the anti-donatist work of Optatus of Milevis – a fourth-century bishop of Milevis in the North African province of Numidia, who before the time of Augustine was the only Catholic apologist in the field against the Donatist. In other words, Augustine relied heavily on both the documents and the historical arguments that Optatus had mustered. While he refined and improved on them, his theological arguments on the validity of the sacraments conferred by sinful ministers came from Optatus.

Suffices it to say that Augustine's ecclesiology, *id est*, his idea of the Church and the world, as well as his thinking about the hierarchical relationship between bishops, priests and people, was largely influenced or shaped by his refutation of the Donatist view of one pure church. This includes also the aspect of sacramental theology. This is well captured by Evers (2012);

The Donatist controversy not only shaped Augustine's ecclesiology; it also profoundly influenced the development of his sacramental theology. The latter is premised upon the idea that a sacrament is a gift from God and that its efficacy is independent of the dignity of the person who administers it. Christ is the author of the sacraments (*C. litt. Pet.* 2.24.57; *C. ep. Parm.* 2.15.34). The officiating priest is only a minister, and no sins of his can interfere with the operation of the sacraments (*Bapt.* 3.10.15; *C. litt. Pet.* 3.49.59; *Ep.* 105.3.12; *Io. Ev. tr.* 5.6) [2012].

Therefore, contrary to the Donatists' emphasis on the *person of the minister* of the sacraments, Augustine shifts attention to the *duty of the minister* who acts in *persona Christi*. Hence, for Augustine, Christ is the real author of the sacraments.

Generally speaking, Augustine's position is that the efficacy of a sacrament is derived *ex opere operato* (from the work or action performed) and this refers to the grace-conferring power inherent in the sacramental rite itself, and not *ex opere operantis* (from the agent's activity) which refers to the role and value of the minister's or recipient's moral condition in causing or receiving sacramental grace. Hence, the efficacy of a sacrament is derived from the action performed and not from the holiness of the minister or the recipient of the sacrament. In other words, the validity of the sacraments does not depend on the moral or spiritual condition of the minister, but upon Christ, who is the true minister of every sacrament. By this position, Augustine established what would later be adopted by the Church as her official position concerning sacramental theology.

To further buttress this point, Augustine distinguished the action of Christ versus the action of the minister when performing a sacrament: Christ acts by His power (*potestas*), while the minister acts by the ministry entrusted to him by Christ. As long as the minister administers the sacrament using the proper matter and form, *id est*, the Church's formula for baptism, it is validly administered. This conviction makes Augustine to say in His *Commentary on John 5*, 18: "...those whom Judas baptized, Christ baptized. So too, then, those whom a drunkard baptized, those whom a murderer baptized, those whom an adulterer baptized, if the Baptism was of Christ, Christ baptized", *quos autem baptizavit Judas, Christus baptizavit. Sic ergo quos baptizavit ebriosus, quos baptizavit homicida, quos baptizavit adulter, si baptismus Christi erat, Christus baptizavit. (In Ioannis evangelium tractatus 5,18).*

For Augustine, therefore, Sacraments are "signs" composed of "words" and "things," which cause what they signify. He holds that the spoken word is the quintessential human sign because it actualizes what it signifies, that is, it renders its referent present in the mind. As the incarnate Word of God, Christ, therefore, he argues, is the perfect sign because he embodies God. The sacraments, for Augustine, are of the same order-perfect Word-because they are signs that embody Christ to such an extent that even "if Judas baptizes, it is Christ who baptizes" as we have seen above (Finn, 1992; see also Augustine's *Commentary on John 5:18, 6:7*). Augustine and his predecessor Optatus argue that the recipient of the sacrament receives "something" from the sacrament irrespective of the minister's moral character (i.e., whether he is a known or public sinner) or of his ecclesiastical status (heretic, *id est*, one of erroneous belief or schismatic, *id est*, one separated from the Church). As a result and contrary to the Donatists, Augustine and Optatus hold that even when a schismatic or a heretic baptizes, the sacrament is valid.

Augustine goes even further, arguing that baptism imprints a "mark" ("seal" or "character") on the recipients quite irrespective of their "worthiness" or "dispositions", in virtue of which the "benefit" or "grace" of the sacrament revives (Augustine's *On Baptism* 10-13). Quite apart, then, from the minister's

situation or the recipient's disposition, Christ offers salvation, or, as Augustine and Optatus put it, the sacrament is valid. In arguing thus, they establish for their medieval successors the distinction between the validity of a properly celebrated sacrament and its fruitfulness: Validity depends on the act of Christ embodied in the sign rather than on the moral character or ecclesiastical situation of the minister; fruitfulness depends on the disposition of the recipient. Thus, Augustine and Optatus set the foundation for the medieval teaching that in their very celebration sacraments affect what they signify (*ex opere operato*).

However, Augustine does not stop at that. He also indirectly expresses the need for the minister to be responsible enough to reflect the mystery that he celebrates. But in a situation where the minister does not reflect the ministry he celebrates, his inability to do so would not affect the validity of the sacrament that he administers. This he expresses in these words: "As for the proud minister, he is to be ranked with the devil. Christ's gift is not thereby profaned: what flows through him keeps its purity, and what passes through him remains clear and reaches the fertile earth. The spiritual power of the sacrament is indeed comparable to light: those to be enlightened receive it in its purity, and if it should pass through defiled beings, it is not itself defiled." The Latin text reads: *Qui vero fuerit superbus minister, cum zabulo computatur: sed non contaminatur donum Christi, quod per illum fluit purum, quod per illum transit liquidum venit ad fertilem terram... Spiritalis enim virtus Sacramenti ita est ut lux: et ab illuminandis pura excipitur, et si per immundos transeat, non inquinatur* (*In Ioannis evangelium tractatus*, 5, 15).

Augustine and the Donatists: Common Ground and Point of Departure

The Donatist controversy took a different toll when it was interpreted to include the moral state of the minister in relation to the sacrament he ministers. This has a big implication on both the minister, who is involved in the process of conferring holiness on the one that receives the sacrament through him; but the implication is more on the recipient upon whom holiness is conferred.

I. Conferment of Holiness Through the Sacraments

It is important to acknowledge the fact that both Augustine and the Donatists are on the same page as regards the primary responsibility of the priest, which is to administer the sacraments, mainly, baptism and the Eucharist. However, this does not rule out other functions carried out by the priest such as preaching, teaching, exhorting and consoling the people of God. It is through the sacraments that holiness is conferred on the Christians. This is a common ground for both Augustine and the Donatists as captured by Dodaro:

For both Augustine and the Donatists, nothing that priests do matters more than to administer the sacraments, primarily baptism and Eucharist. Of course, both Augustine and the Donatists acknowledged that priests carry out other important ministries; they preach the Word,

teach, exhort and console Christians in their faith. Yet nothing more than baptism and Eucharist communicates to believers the spiritual peace and reconciliation that constitute the ground for holiness. Hence, sacraments play an essential role in making Christians holy, and priests are inseparable from that process (2010).

The aforementioned statement also reveals that both Augustine and the Donatists agree that sacraments play an important role in enhancing the holiness of the recipients of these sacraments. These are common grounds that unite Augustine's position with that of the Donatists.

ii. Relationship between the Minister and the Recipient of a Sacrament

However, the major point of divergence between Augustine's position and that of the Donatists concerns how this holiness is conferred on the recipients of the sacraments through the instrumentality of the minister. For the Donatists, the holiness conferred on the recipients of the sacraments is tied to the life of the minister and is strongly linked with his state of holiness or not. And so for the Donatist, their attention was more on the person of the minister of the sacrament. For them, it is the lifestyle of the priest that determines the validity or invalidity of the sacrament. But for Augustine, it is the action that is performed (using the proper matter and form) that determines the validity or invalidity of the sacrament. Secondly, for the Donatists, it is the minister that determines the validity or invalidity of the sacraments. But for Augustine it is Christ the invisible minister who renders the sacrament valid. Ployd (2014), who sees the theology of the Donatist to be similar to that of Cyprian during the re-baptism controversy, describes this situation in relation to the office of the Bishop who was seen as the minister of the sacrament of baptism he says. He sees baptismal efficacy as the power (*potestas*) of baptism, he says: as regards the sacramental theology of Cyprian and the Donatists, for whom baptismal *potestas* represent the authority and ability of bishops within the true church to impart the Holy Spirit and, correlatively, the ability of those outside the true church to do that which they lack the *potestas* to do.

Therefore, for the Donatists, the idea of validity was linked with the idea of the purity of the minister; but for Augustine validity depends on the action performed irrespective of the moral standing of the minister as long as the actions are properly performed.

Evaluation

Having seen the teaching of the Donatists, especially their idea of the relationship between the minister of the sacrament and the sacrament he administers, here are critical analysis of the two positions, namely, the position held by the Donatists and on the other hand that of Augustine that came to be adopted by the Catholic Church as her official teaching. Highlighted are two salient points that concern the priestly vocation itself below:

a. The sense of unworthiness when called

To answer these questions it is of utmost importance to bring the biblical examples of the Patriarchs and prophets called by God to work for Him. What is common to most of them was the expression of the sense of unworthiness and apprehension when God called them: when God called Moses to send him to Pharaoh, he complained of his speech impediment, "O Lord, I am not eloquent...for I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue" (Exodus 4:10); when God called the Prophet Isaiah, he simply said, "I am a man of unclean Lips" (Isaiah 6:5); when God called the Prophet Jeremiah, he also said, "Ah Lord I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth" (Jeremiah 1:6). In the Gospels, one of the narratives about the call of Peter took place after the miraculous catch of fish during which Peter confessed his unworthiness in these words, 'Leave me, Lord; I am a sinful man' (Luke 5:8).

Similarly, the history of the Church has also revealed men who shied away from the priesthood because of the same feeling of unworthiness. John Chrysostom disappeared on the day he and his friend Basil of Nazianzus were to be ordained priests. Why did he do that? The answer is that he did not feel qualified for the honour; he admits that he was "still entangled in the lusts of the world but felt that his friend was more qualified than he was. He argued that he did not want "to deprive the flock of Christ of a young man who was so good and so well qualified. *On the Priesthood* is written as an apology or a defence of a betrayal of sorts by Chrysostom. Basil was hurt and felt betrayed by his friend but John Chrysostom defended his action. He claimed that not all deception could be bad and said that the deception was for the benefit of the deceived. He argues that he intended to make sure that his friend did not follow him in rejecting the office of priest.

So basically, John Chrysostom wrote *De sacerdotio, On the Priesthood*, to show and argue for the dignity of the priestly office. He saw the office of priesthood as an overwhelming honour requiring the greatest amount of faithfulness. The same circumstances led to the writing of other patristic priestly documents: St. Gregory Nazianzus's Second *Oratione*, known as *De fuga* (On Flight) and St. Gregory the Great's *De regulae pastoralis* (On pastoral Rule).

These are just a few instances among many. It suffices then, to say that it is natural to feel that way. Why are these instances in the context of this write-up? This is simply to make the point that just as the call to the priesthood depends on God who calls, so also the validity of what the priest administers depends on God, who is the invisible but real minister of the sacraments. And so what matters is not the feeling of unworthiness, but that Christ calls one. The Priesthood then is a gift from God. What is needed when called is one's availability to do God's will.

b. The Choice and Call to the Priesthood Depends on God just as the Validity of the Sacraments Depends on Him.

Is anyone worthy of becoming a priest? Is the priesthood a profession or a vocation? No doubt, no one, considering the expectations of the priestly office is worthy of such an exalted office as it is a vocation and not a profession, *Non me eligisti me, sed voi me eligo* ("You did not choose, but I chose you" [John 15:16]). The Letter to the Hebrews is also emphatic on this, "No one takes this honour upon himself, but must be called, just as Aaron was" (Hebrews 5:4). Thus, in talking about the worthiness of the priest concerning the validity of the sacraments he administers, it is pertinent to also ask this important question: if the validity of the sacraments were to depend on the worthiness of the priest, who is that priest that is worthy?

Therefore, no one is truly worthy of the priesthood; no one is qualified, but the Lord calls the weak to make worthy and to qualify the one called. He doesn't choose men because they are better than others or are more worthy. It therefore follows that just as the choice of being a priest does not depend on the priest, similarly, the validity of what he does, does not depend on him.

The Church's Teaching on Sacramental Theology

It is important to state here as earlier observed that Augustine's teaching that emerged as a result of his polemics against the Donatist came to be adopted as the official teaching of the Church. This portion intends to summarize what these teachings are.

(a) Following his submissions the Church teaches that when a sacrament is celebrated according to the norms of the Church and in faith, we believe that it confers the grace it signifies. While a human being is the minister of the sacrament, Christ Himself is the one who is at work: He baptizes, He confirms, He absolves, He changes the bread and wine into His Body and Blood, He unites a couple in marriage, He ordains, and He anoints. Acting in His sacraments, Christ communicates the grace— that sharing in the divine life and love of God— offered through each sacrament (cf. CCC, 1127-1128).

Therefore, the Church's teaching is clear on this when she says that the sacraments act *ex opere operato*, that is "by the very fact of the action's being performed." The efficacy of the sacrament does not depend upon the human minister— whether a bishop, priest, deacon, or layperson— being free of mortal sin and thereby in a state of grace. Here then is the distinction between Christ who instituted the sacraments and acts through them to communicate His grace, and the human person who acts as Christ's minister in performing the sacrament.

(b) The Church has continued to reassert this teaching, especially in those times of crisis. In the Middle Ages, when clerical laxity was a problem in some areas, St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1224) taught, "The sacrament is not wrought by the

righteousness of either the celebrant or the recipient, but by the power of God" (*Summa Theologiae*, III, 68, 8).

(c) In response to the objections of certain Protestant Reformers, the Council of Trent in its *Decree on the Sacraments* (1547) declared, "If anyone says that a minister in the state of mortal sin, though he observes all the essentials that belong to the performing and conferring of the sacrament, does not perform or confer the sacrament, *anathema sit*" (that is, "let him be condemned").

(d) Finally, the *Catechism* asserts, "From the moment that a sacrament is celebrated following the intention of the Church, the power of Christ and His Spirit acts in and through it, independently of the personal holiness of the minister" (CCC, 1128).

In a word, therefore, the Church teaches that Christ, who instituted the sacraments ensures that the sacraments convey the grace they signify. This is because if the efficacy of a sacrament were to depend upon the moral standing of the human minister, it would be difficult to be sure if the grace would be received or conferred.

Conclusion

The Church, from the very beginning, has developed through different experiences both positive and negative. Even what appeared to be negative only serves as a disguise for some positive development in the life of the Church. The Church has faced a lot of crises, and controversies that only helped her to come out stronger from each of them. The Donatist controversy as we have seen in this write-up, contributed to helping the Church to grow in the aspect of sacramental theology involving the life of the minister concerning the sacraments he ministers. This we have seen in the polemics of Augustine who faced the Donatists headlong and became a champion of true Catholic teaching which the Donatists contradict.

However, to conclude, the point must be made here that the minister's lifestyle should reflect the mysteries he celebrates. That the validity of the sacrament does not depend on the worthiness of the priest should not give room for a casual approach towards the mysteries celebrated. Hence, ministers of the sacraments should strive always to be worthy ministers of the sacraments they celebrate, acting in a state of grace and reflecting the Christ in whose person they act.

On their part, the lay faithful should go beyond the minister and look up to Christ as the supreme model and example. They should know that their faith in the mysteries of Christ plays a vital role in the fruitfulness of the sacraments they receive this is because the fruitfulness of the sacraments depends on their cooperation. They should not forget that Jesus did not see the scribes and the Pharisees as good religious leaders and because of that He warned his disciples:

Do and observe what they tell you but do not do as they do. On the one hand, Jesus condemns the leadership style of the scribes and the Pharisees and on the other hand, it was a warning to his disciples, especially the Apostles to be exemplary by practising what they practice.

The priest requires salvation, forgiveness and healing just like the rest of us. He strives to live up to the call to holiness that we all were called to at baptism. The priest in his weakness is called by God to act in his person and in doing that, it is God who acts through him in the power of the Holy Spirit. Both the clergy and the lay members of the Church should know that the validity and efficacy of the sacraments administered and received call them to cooperate with the divine mysteries.

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Works of Augustine:

- *In Ioannis evangelium tractatus 5* (Homilies on the Gospel of John 5)
- *Psalmus contra partem Donati* (Psalm against the Donatists)
- *Contra litteras Petilianii* (Against the letters of Petilian)
- *Contra epistulam Parmeniani* (Against the Epistle of Parmenian)
- *De Baptismo* (On Baptism)