THE AFTERMATH OF THE LAST GREAT PERSECUTION--THE DONATISTS

Scripture: I Thessalonians 4:1-8
Prayer: Arnobius: Against the Heathen, IV.36,37 (ANF VI.p. 488-89)
Hymn: 443 "More Holiness Give Me"

THE DISCIPLINARY PROBLEMS FACED BY THE CHURCH FOLLOWING THE LAST GREAT PERSECUTION

In the last great persecution there were more martyrs and confessors than in the earlier persecutions. There were also more apostates--people who denied Christ and worshipped the Roman gods. Once the persecution abated many of these came flocking back to the churches begging for forgiveness. As in the earlier persecutions the problem of dealing with the apostates resulted in schism in the three great churches, Rome, Alexandria and Carthage.

THE SCHISM OF HERACLITUS IN ROME: Heraclitus led a party advocating even greater laxity than was usually characteristic of the Roman church.

THE MELETIAN SCHISM IN ALEXANDRIA: Bishop Peter fled when the persecution came. Meletius of Lycopolis in Thebaid came in from the country as champion of the native Copts, denounced Bishop Peter as unworthy, and proclaimed himself bishop. Arius from Antioch joined the Meletian Schism. Bishop Peter returned, gained control, had Meletius arrested and condemned. Arius was restored. Meletius and his followers continued in schism.

THE DONATIST SCHISM IN NORTH AFRICA:
The long, smoldering resentment of the native Berbers against Greeks and Romans and the rising nationalism.
The conflicting opinions concerning the role of Christians in persecution:
Those who favored running away or hiding
Those who felt it was permissible to make a show of conforming to the emperor's decrees--Bishop Mensurius of Carthage surrendered heretical books for burning. Felix of Aptungia was reputed to have surrendered the communion set to the police.
The rigorists insisted that any semblance of conforming made one a "traitor"--the Christian must openly defy the emperor and seek martyrdom.
The early stages of the conflict;
The deacon, Caecilian, picketed the jail in Carthage to keep the rigorists who criticised Bishop Mensurius from carrying food to their members who had been arrested and thrown in prison.
The deacon, Caecilian, publicly rebuked the wealthy lady, Lucilla, for kissing the bones of an unauthorized saint.
Lucilla began holding meetings in her home, endowed the separated church and made her private chaplain, Majorinus, the bishop of the church. Rigorists of Numidia backed her.
Bishop Mensurius was martyred in the persecution and the majority chose the deacon, Caecilian, as bishop, and three bishops of North Africa, Felix of Aptungia, Novellus of Tyzicum, and Faustinus of Tuburbo, consecrated him.
Majorinus died and the rigorists made Donatus, a Numidian rigorist bishop of Casa Nigra, the bishop of Lucilla's church.
Donatus as bishop of the rigorist church in Carthage, Secundus of Tigisis, the senior rigorist bishop of Numidia, and Lucilla call a synod attended by seventy rigorist bishops of North Africa. The rigorist synod condemned the consecration of Caecilian and declared it null and void because he had been ordained and consecrated by traitors. Mensurius who had ordained him had surrendered the works of heretics to be burned, making a show of conforming to the emperor's decree. The three bishops who had laid hands on Caecilian were all traitors. They later dropped the charges against Novellus of Tyzicum and Faustinus of Tuburbo, but they steadfastly insisted Felix of Aptunga was a traitor who had surrendered the communion set and hence the consecration of Caecilian was not valid. They declared Donatus the true bishop of the true church of Carthage. They took the position that no apostates could be restored to fellowship. Caecilian had welcomed apostates to penance and forgiveness. Hence his church was a church of apostates and adulterers and no true church.

The main conflict: Constantine after the Edict of Milan sent gifts to the clergy of the churches to make up for the persecution. His agents delivered the gifts in Carthage to Caecilian. Donatus and the rigorists made a formal protest claiming the gifts should have come to them as representatives of the true church. They maintained the church of Caecilian was an apostate church.

The Synod at the Lateran Palace in Rome, September 313. Constantine, troubled by the bitter conflict in Carthage, ordered the bishop of Rome to call a synod of Italian bishops to try to settle the conflict. Both Caecilian and Donatus were ordered to attend. Fifteen Italian bishops attended. In October, 313, the bishops ruled that the charges of Donatus were groundless and that Caecilian was the true bishop of Carthage. Donatus would not accept the results of the council. He was excommunicated and both Donatus and Caecilian were ordered to stay out of Carthage for forty days to allow things to cool down. On their return the controversy became more bitter than before.

The Council of Arles, 314 A.D. Constantine ordered both parties to appear, specifying the route of travel for each party. Again Donatus was condemned. Ordination by unworthy clerics was recognized provided the right formula was used. Heretical baptism was recognized on the same grounds. The Roman date of Easter was approved.

The Donatists refused to accept the council. Constantine ordered the army to close Donatist churches—Christians persecuted Christians. Constantine tried force, flattery, persuasion on the Donatists and all failed. Occupied with his struggle with Licinius for sole rule of the empire he finally gave up on the Donatists and decided to ignore them. Constantine's sons would later decide to send the army to exterminate the Donatists. The Donatists fled inward to the mountains and deserts and survived to continue a thorn in the side of the church in Carthage.