

LETTER 10*

Introduction

The new letters make us more aware of the activities of Augustine's friend, bishop Alypius of Thagaste, and of his travels in Italy on behalf of the African bishops. In the later stages of the Pelagian conflict and for some time afterward, one by-product of his travels was the facilitating of his transmitting of Julian of Eclanum's attacks and Augustine's replies from Italy to Africa and back.

But the main subject of this letter concerns the plight of the people of North Africa who in this twilight of the Roman empire (as we see it) were plagued by increasing insecurity and threats of violence. Abhorrent as it may seem to us, parents were permitted by Roman law to "lease" their children as indentured servants for a set number of years to the maximum of twenty-five. Indeed it has been suggested that this was a special measure promoted by the Christian emperors in the hope of curbing the greater evil of infanticide. Unfortunately, "leased" children had a habit of slipping into slave status over the long run. Traders treated them like slaves. How could they prove and regain their free status years later? If the traders sold them to barbarian masters they might as well abandon any hope of having their free status eventually recognized.¹

Worse still, Augustine relates that groups of thugs now roamed through the African countryside simply abducting and carrying off children and adults and selling them. Easterners, Galatians from Asia Minor, apparently predominated in this evil business. There were laws; specifically, Augustine came up with one from a few years earlier in the fifth century, promulgated during the time of the western emperor Honorius but it probably did not concern this matter precisely and, in any event, it was not being enforced. In his horror of bloodshed, Augustine thought the penalty attached to this law too draconian—flogging with whips tipped with leaden thongs could kill the victim. That is the trouble with laws which have excessive punishments attached—authorities are afraid to apply them. Augustine strongly suggested to Alypius that what was needed was a revised law with, say, a heavy financial penalty against the malefactors.

The situation of these slave traders is made worse by Augustine's

1. Claude Lepelley, "Notes complémentaires," pp. 472–474. BA 46B.

mention of what even ordinary people were doing in Hippo. One woman lured other women from the area of Mount Giddaba under the pretext of buying wood from them, took them captive and sold them. A farmer sold his wife. Even one of his own monks was nearly carried off. This dark picture is relieved by one very unusual bright spot. When one of these slave ships docked at Hippo, some of Augustine's parishioners raided both the ship and the prison where some of the unfortunate victims were being held before being made to board the ship. One hundred and twenty were freed. Perhaps in view of the uncertain legality of such an action, Augustine made a point of stressing that this happened when he was away. But the incident points up the fact that the reason for his writing this memorandum to Alypius was not just the problem in general but the immediate potential danger to Christians in Hippo that those who had taken part in the raid and who were now sheltering those liberated might themselves be threatened by legal action by the government. Augustine stressed that the slavers had friends in high places who protected them and might now try to help them get their "merchandise" back.

This incident in Hippo was very unusual. It is almost always held that Christian antiquity simply took slavery for granted as a social institution. While it might be possible to lighten the burden of the slaves, there was to be no abolitionist movement among the fathers of the Church. Indeed some have suggested that Christianity made the fate of slaves worse by stressing the need for slaves who were Christians to be good and exemplary slaves, obedient to their masters. Even here Augustine is not so much attacking slavery in itself but the reduction of men, women and children, who were supposed to be free, to the *de facto* state of being slaves. Whatever the bright spots, the general picture is a sombre one of increasing violence and insecurity, of late antiquity as a new age of iron.²

Date

Commentators place the date of the letter in the early years of the episcopate of Pope Celestine, i.e. late 422 or 423, though Berrouard places it in 428.

Augustine: A memorandum to our holy brother Alypius:



W HILE OUR HOLY BROTHERS and fellow bishops were returning, although I did not see them, I was alerted by their letters that if I wanted to write something to your

2. On slavery and the Church, see further Gervase Corcoran, *St. Augustine on Slavery*, *Studia Ephemeridis*, "Augustinianum," 22 (Roma: Augustinianum, 1985); Gaudemet, pp. 664–667; Michel Humbert, *Colloq.*, pp. 189–204; Jean

Holiness, I should send it to Carthage. So I have dictated these lines with which I greet you. For some time now, ever since your letter spoke about your return, I have hoped to see you. I wrote to you that I had received your memorandum, together with the books of Julian and Celestius³ which you sent with our son the deacon Commilito.⁴ Further, I was greatly surprised that you had not taken the trouble to tell me anything about the disciplining of Turbantius,⁵ to whom Julian wrote the four books. I heard from a man, whom I cannot believe was lying, that with sufficiently humble confession he had condemned the very same heresy and was received into Catholic communion by Pope Celestine. Moreover, when you wrote to me, I could have guessed that you had forgotten about it. Although I had written these things, still I wanted to remind you now, lest perchance your Holiness receive this before you received what I wrote earlier. In the meantime, looking through our records, I found a copy of a memorandum which you had made for your own benefit, when you were first sent to the court by a council. Rereading it I saw that there were many important matters you were not able to take care of then and, leaving out certain things which either have already been done or did not seem to be very pressing, I thought I should write just in case they could be taken care of now.

(2) Then there is another matter. There are so many of those in Africa who are commonly called “slave dealers” (*man-gones*), that they seem to be draining Africa of much of its human population and transferring their “merchandise” to

Rougé, *Colloq.*, pp. 177–188; G. de Ste. Croix, “Early Christian Attitudes to Property and Slavery” in *Studies in Church History*, ed. Derek Baker, vol. 12, “Church, Society and Politics,” pp. 1–38 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1975).

3. On Julian of Eclanum and Celestius, see *ep.* 6*. While Celestius was closely linked to Pelagius in the first part of the Pelagian controversy, Pelagius disappears after the Roman condemnation. It is less common to find Celestius’ name linked with that of Julian.

4. Deacon, otherwise unknown.

5. An Italian bishop who had initially sided with Julian in rejecting Pope Zosimus’ anti-Pelagian *epistola tractoria* of 418. Julian’s reaction in four books to the first book of Augustine’s *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* was addressed *Ad Turbantium*. This letter mentions that Turbantius had since been reconciled to the Church.

the provinces across the sea. Almost all of these are free persons. Only a few are found to have been sold by their parents and these people buy them, not as Roman laws permits, as indentured servants for a period of twenty-five years, but in fact they buy them as slaves and sell them across the sea as slaves. True slaves are sold by their masters only rarely. Now from this bunch of merchants has grown up a multitude of pillaging and corrupting "dealers" so that in herds, shouting, in frightening military or barbarian attire they invade sparsely populated and remote rural areas and they violently carry off those whom they would sell to these merchants.

(3) I omit what rumor has most recently proclaimed, that in a certain small village, in an incursion of this sort, men were killed and the women and children were carried off to be sold; but where this happened, if indeed it happened at all, has not been made clear. Once when I was with some of those who had been freed from their wretched captivity by our church, I asked one young girl how she had come to be sold to the slave dealer. She said she had been taken from her parents' home. Then I asked whether she had been at home alone at the time; she said that it was done in the presence of her parents and brothers. One of her brothers who came to get her had been present and, because she was little, he revealed to us how it had been done. He said that thugs like these break in at night. The more they are able to conceal themselves, the less likely the victims are to resist; since they think they are a barbarian band. But if there were not traders such as these, things like this would not be done. I don't in the least believe that this evil that goes on in Africa is entirely unknown where you are. It was infinitely less serious earlier when the emperor Honorius sent a decree to the prefect Hadrian,⁶ repressing traffic of this sort, sentencing such wicked "businessmen" to be flogged with leaden thongs, proscribed, and sent into perpetual exile. Nor does this law speak of those who sell free persons who have been lured and kidnapped, because they are almost the only ones who did this, but more generally

6. Praetorian prefect of Italy, Illyricum and Africa between 401 and 405 and again in 413-414. PLRE, "Hadrianus 2."

about all who transport families to provinces across the sea to be sold. It orders that these slaves be turned over to the tax collectors, something which would not be said at all about free persons.

(4) I have attached a copy of this law to this memorandum although the text can perhaps be found more easily in Rome; for it is useful and can be invoked to cure this scourge. We have begun to make use of it as much as is necessary to free people, but not to bring terrible penalties down upon these traders because of whom such numerous and terrible crimes are perpetrated. For we wish to constrain those whom we can by invoking this law, but we do not wish to punish; in fact, we are afraid lest others bring these men exposed by us, however detestable and worthy of condemnation they are, to the punishments required by law. Hence I am writing these things to your blessedness in order that all of this, if possible, be done in such a way by the most pious and Christian rulers that these traders not come in danger of the penalty which has been prescribed in this law, and especially not the flogging with lead which easily brings about the man's death, on those occasions when men are freed from them through the Church. And it is necessary in order to constrain these same people that this law be promulgated, lest we, being afraid of the consequences, hold back, and unfortunate free persons continue to be carried off into perpetual servitude. Now, if we do nothing for them, who can easily be found (if he have some authority in the coastal areas) who does not sell them more advantageously for the cruellest sea voyages, rather than take even one of these unfortunates off a ship, or even not allow them to be put on such a ship in the first place, out of Christian or human compassion?

(5) Whatever authorities or offices have responsibility for this law, or for whatever law may be made on this matter, it is up to them to see to it that it is enforced in order that Africa will cease being emptied of its native inhabitants and that in large groups, like a never ending stream, a great multitude of people of both sexes will no longer lose their freedom in a form of captivity worse than that experienced among the barbarians. Many are bought back from the barbarians but,

transported to provinces across the sea, these have scant possibility of such a form of rescue. The barbarians are resisted when the Roman army is in good condition for fear that Romans will be held in barbarian captivity. But who resists these traders who are found everywhere, who traffick, not in animals but in human beings, not in barbarians but in Romans from the provinces? Who resists when these people everywhere and from every side, carried off by violence and ensnared by deception, are led away into the hands of those who bid for them? Who will resist in the name of Roman freedom—I shall not say, the common freedom but their very own?

(6) No one can state satisfactorily how many fall into this same nefarious business because of the incredible blindness of greed and some kind of infection by this disease. Who would believe, for instance, that there is a woman among us here in Hippo who, as a matter of course, lures women from Gidda⁷ under the pretext of buying wood and then confines, beats and sells them? Who would believe that one of the church's tenant farmers, apparently a good man, would sell his wife, the mother of his sons, not because of any fault on her part, but stirred solely by this feverish pestilence? A young man, scarcely twenty, an intelligent fellow, who kept the accounts for our monastery, was led astray and sold; only with the greatest difficulty was the church able to procure his freedom.

(7) Even if I wished to list all the crimes—just the ones we have had contact with—it would not be possible to do so. Listen to this one case, from which you can get some idea of what is going on all over Africa, and especially in the coastal areas. Hardly four months before I write, and from all areas, but especially from Numidia, people were being brought by Galatian merchants—these are especially avid and throw themselves into this type of business—for transportation from the shores of Hippo. There was not lacking a faithful Christian who, knowing our custom in missions of mercy of this kind, made this known to the church. Immediately, partially from the ship in which they had already been loaded, partially from the spot where they had been hidden prior to boarding, about

7. Lepelley, BA 46, p. 471f., note K.

120 were freed by our people, though I myself was absent. Scarcely five or six were found to have been sold by their parents; of all the others, hardly a person could keep himself from tears on hearing all the various ways by which they were brought to the Galatians by trickery or kidnapping.

(8) Your Holy Prudence can imagine how much similar trafficking in unfortunate souls goes on in other coastal areas, if at Hippo Regius, where in God's mercy the great vigilance of the church is on the watch so that poor people can be freed from captivity of this sort and these people who carry on such a trade, though far from suffering from the severity of this law are nevertheless punished, at least by the loss of the money they originally spent, so great is the greed of these people, so bold the barbarism of these Galatians. I beseech you, through your Christian charity, that these words have not been written to your charity in vain. For these Galatians do not lack advocates, with whose support they demand back from us those whom the Lord has freed, restored through the action of the church, even those already restored to their own families who had been seeking them and who came to us with letters from bishops. Even as I dictate these lines, they are beginning to upset several of the faithful, our sons, with whom some of those entrusted to them have been staying—for the church could not feed all those whom it freed. Despite the fact that a letter has come from an authority whom they could fear ****; they have not in any way halted their efforts to get their captives back.

(9) To all those who have been so good as to send us greetings via your letter I send greetings in return for their merits in the charity of Christ. My fellow servants who are with me greet your holiness with me.