

The Augustinian Community and the Primitive Church

Troublesome prepositions are very often explained away as superfluous even by pedantic philologists, but only a superficial reader would pass over a queer conjunction without retracing his steps to reread his passage. It is one of these conjunctions, a simple *enim* in the Rule of St. Augustine, that entices the present writer to enquire further into its possible hidden meaning. St Augustine writes:

« Et non dicatis aliquid proprium, sed sint vobis omnia communia... Sic *enim* legitis in Actibus Apostolorum quia erant eis omnia communia et distribuebatur unicuique sicut cuique opus erat » ¹⁾).

If the scriptural text cited had only been a doctrinal passage, the *enim* would have been quite in place. But the quotation is historical; therefore the *enim* can only find a suitable explanation if we presume that St. Augustine had in mind to imitate in his monastic society the primitive community of Jerusalem.

Our suspicion assumes the grade of certainty when we compare the above passage to a parallel text in Sermon 356:

« Quomodo autem vivere velimus, quomodo Deo propitio jam vivamus, quamvis de Scriptura sancta multi noveritis, tamen ad commemorandos vos, ipsa de libro Actuum Apostolorum nobis lectio recitabitur, ut videatis ubi descripta sit forma, quam desideramus implere. Dum ergo recitatur, vos intentissimos volo, ut post ejus recitationem, quod institui loquar, Deo donante, intentioni vestrae. (Et Lazarus diaconus legit :) « Cum orassent, motus est locus in quo erant congregati, et impleti sunt omnes Spiritu Sancto, et loquebantur verbum Dei cum fiducia omni volenti.

¹⁾ *Regula*, I, cited according to the critical edition of W. HÜMPFNER, in *Liber Vitasfratrum*, New York, 1943, Appendix C.

Multitudinis autem credentium erat anima una et cor unum ; et nemo eorum quae possidebat, dicebat aliquid suum esse, sed erant illis omnia communia. Et virtute magna reddebant Apostoli testimonium resurrectionis Domini Jesu : gratiaque magna erat super omnes illos.

Neque enim quisquam egens erat inter illos. Quotquot enim possessores praediorum vel domorum erant, vendentes offerebant pretia illorum, et ponebant ante pedes Apostolorum. Distribuebatur autem unicuique prout cuique opus erat... ». Audistis quid velimus : orate ut possimus » ²⁾).

It should by be now clear that the form of life described in Acts 4, 32-37 is the model of St. Augustine's community. Our intention is to examine more closely this biblical text together with its parallels so as to bring out more distinctly the monastic ideal of our Holy Father. Then we shall see briefly how Augustine put this ideal into practice.

A thorough investigation into the life of the primitive Church would involve a minute exegesis of all the books of the New Testament. This is neither possible nor necessary however, as St Augustine himself only refers to Acts 4, 32-37. Therefore this text need only be examined in its immediate context. Acts 2, 42-47 is an exact parallel to our passage and can shed much light upon it. We shall transcribe both passages side by side and proceed immediately to the exegesis ³⁾).

Acts 2, 42-47

42. And they persevered in the teaching of the apostles and the fellowship, the breaking of the bread and the prayers. 43. And fear fell upon every soul ; and many wonders and signs were wrought through the apostles. 44. And all they that had believed held all things in common together ; 45. and they used to sell their property and goods and distribute the price among all, according as anyone

Acts 4, 32-37

32. Now the multitude of believers were of one heart and soul, and not one of them said that anything of his possessions was his own, but they had all things in common. 33. And with great power the apostles delivered their witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34. Nor was there anyone in want among them ; for as many as were owners of lands or

²⁾ *Sermo* 356, l. P. L. 39, 1574.

³⁾ The New Testament is cited according to the Westminster Version.

had need. 46. Day by day they persevered with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread at home, they took food with joyful simplicity of heart, 47. praising God and in favour with the whole people. And the Lord added to the company day by day those who were being saved.

houses used to sell them, and bring the money from the sales and lay it at the feet of the apostles, 35. and was distributed to each according as anyone had need. 36. And Joseph, who had been surnamed Barnabas by the apostles (which translated is « son of exhortation »), a Levite of Cyprian origin, 37. sold a field which belonged to him, and brought the price and laid it at the feet of the apostles.

(Note. Textual variations in the above passages are irrelevant to the general meaning, with two exceptions. In 2, 42 some manuscripts add « with one accord » after « persevered ». Cod. D, Cyprian and Ambrose insert « and there was no division whatsoever among them » after « one heart and soul » in 4, 32. Although these additions are generally not accepted as genuine, they are useful as commentaries, stressing the unity of the primitive Christians among themselves.)

The first problem that arises from the comparison of these texts is: Why does St. Luke repeat the same thing twice? The first account follows closely upon St. Peter's opening discourse, and is probably meant to describe the lasting effects of the word of God. The second is an introduction to the story of Ananias and Sapphira, and is inseparable from it. Both passages refer to the same circumstance however, and must be studied together ⁴).

The Teaching of the Apostles. At such an early stage of the history of the Church the teaching of the Apostles had not yet assumed any definite stereotyped form. The account of the death and resurrection of the Lord occupied the foremost place; His life and doctrine served to instruct more deeply those who had already believed.

According to the Oriental custom, such teachings had to be learned by heart. Through constant repetition, this *kerygma* crystallized into a fixed « catechism » which later became our Gospels. That this teaching did not remain pure speculation is testified by the minute description of the life of the first Christians.

⁴) This is also the method followed by Th. ZAHN, in *Die Apostolgeschichte des Lucas I*, Leipzig, 1922 (3rd edition).

We are told that the Apostles worked many signs and wonders. This they did undoubtedly to confirm the new converts in their Faith, and to gain others. Moreover, miracles in the New Testament are often meant to symbolize the spiritual renovation of Man brought about by Christ. St. Luke goes on to tell us that in consequence of these miracles « fear fell upon every soul » (2, 43). Miracles are very often followed by fear in the Lucan writings (cf. Lc 5, 26 ; 8, 37). This fear is a natural phenomenon arising from the feeling of being in the presence of a mysterious power, but it is also the psychological foundation of the true « fear of God » at which the Apostles aimed in their preaching (cf. Acts 5, 5.11 ; 9, 31 ; 21, 26) and is not incompatible with « joyful simplicity of heart » (2, 46).

The Apostles « delivered their witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus » (4, 33). The main requisite for the apostleship was to have seen the risen Lord. They were therefore witnesses to His resurrection (Acts 1, 22) not orators or philosophers, and they could only be judged by the degree of fidelity with which they transmitted the Evangelical Message to their hearers (1 Cor 1-4). Their word is endowed with power (δύναμις) and accompanied by « grace » (4, 33).

The Prayers. The liturgical life of the first Christians has given rise to many and various discussions among biblical scholars. Here we shall only attempt to reconstruct as briefly as possible the liturgy of the primitive community from the data afforded us by the Lucan narrative ⁵⁾. We are told in v. 42 that the Christians persevered in the prayers and in the breaking of the bread (note the articles, present also in the Greek). Moreover, « day by day they persevered with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread at home, they took food with joyful simplicity of heart, praising God and in favour with the whole people » (v. 46).

« The prayers » with the article, does not simply refer to prayers in general, but to a fixed set of prayers recited at regular intervals. V. 46 is an amplification of v. 42, specifying that these prayers took place in the temple (= the Jewish temple in Jerusalem). This is also confirmed by 3, 1 : « Peter and John were going up into the temple for the prayer of the ninth hour », which shows

⁵⁾ For further details cf. E. JACQUIER O. P., *Les Actes des Apôtres*, Paris, 1926.

that the separation of Church and Synagogue did not take place suddenly. The Christians joined the Jews in their common prayers ; nevertheless, they seem to have grouped together at the portico of Salomon inside the temple (Acts 5, 12).

But the Christians had some specific liturgical rights which they could not share with the Jews, namely, « the breaking of the bread ». This phrase was used to designate a common meal among the Jews, but in Christian usage it soon came to signify the Lord's Supper (Cf. Acts 20, 7.11 ; 1 Cor. 10, 16 ; Didache IX, 3 ; the Peshitto has « in fractione eucharistiae »). The faithful, therefore, celebrated the Eucharist in private homes. Those of them who possessed large houses put them at the disposal of their brethren as places of common prayer (cf. Acts 12, 12).

It also seems likely that the Eucharistic ceremony was accompanied by a banquet which was meant to reproduce the setting of the Last Supper, and to foster brotherly love among the participants. These meals were taken « with joyful simplicity of heart », all abuses such as those rebuked by Paul in 1 Cor. 11, 17 being absent ⁶⁾.

The Fellowship. In 2, 42 the Latin Vulgate reads: « in communionem fractionis panis ». The original text however, has the article before *κοινωνία* (fellowship, communion), and all critical editions of the New Testament place a comma after it, so that the translation runs: « in the teaching of the apostles and the fellowship, the breaking of the bread and the prayers ». The fellowship, therefore, stands out alone. What is the exact meaning of this expression ? A comparison of the principal texts in which this word occurs will bring out its richness of meaning.

In the New Testament the word occurs with diverse epithets:

« You have been called into the fellowship of his Son »
1 Cor. 1, 9.

« The fellowship of the holy Spirit » 2 Cor. 13, 13.

« Our fellowship in the Gospel » Phil. 1, 5.

« Fellowship of faith » Phm. 6.

« That ye may have fellowship with us (= the apostles), and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ »
1 Jn. 1, 3.

⁶⁾ Cf. E. STAUFFER, in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum N. T.* I, p. 34 ss.

« We have fellowship with one another » 1 Jn. 1, 7.

These expressions demonstrate that *κοινωνία* was the current term in the Church to denote the union of Christians among themselves and with the hierarchy through their common faith in Christ, who, in turn, elevates it to a supernatural union with God Himself in the Holy Spirit. It is God's answer to the prayer of the Lord: « that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them » (Jn. 17, 26).

We have already remarked that in our passage (2, 42), *κοινωνία* stand alone, without any qualifying epithet. It can very well refer to the community of goods and possessions described in 2, 44f and 4, 32-37, but this material unity was only the exteriorization of the oneness of heart and soul (4, 33), which existed among the Christians, and this, in its turn, was the effect of their fellowship with God through Christ. A. Carr correctly writes:

« What gives a special significance to this primitive form of Christian socialism is that it represents an effort to continue the life of discipleship and companionship with Christ which had been enjoyed by the Twelve, and by others, who had « companied » with them during the earthly ministry... From the first it implied a principle of brotherhood and spiritual fellowship which lies at the root of true Christian Socialism » ⁷).

It is impossible to restrict the meaning of *κοινωνία* in this passage to one determined form of communion exclusive of all others as Lake and Cadbury seem to do in their commentary i. l. ⁸). When St. Luke placed the word alone, he must have done so to endow it with the full richness of connotation which it had already acquired at his time. As we shall see later in this essay, St. Augustine had no other intention in founding his community than to give life to a miniature « Communion of Saints ».

Community of Goods and Possessions. We now come to the central part of our study, in which we must examine the social aspect of the life of the primitive Church. It was exactly this aspect that had the greatest influence on Augustine's monastic programme.

⁷) A. CARR, *The Fellowship (Koinonia) of Acts II, 42 and Cognate Words*, in *The Expositor* 8th Ser., 5 (1913), p. 460 f.

⁸) KIRSOPP LAKE - CADBURY H. J., *The Acts of the Apostles*. London, 1933, Vol. IV, part I, in JACKSON-LAKE, *The Beginnings of Christianity*.

The passages that concern us are 2, 44. 45 ; 4, 31-37. From these texts we learn that:

I. None of the members of the primitive community said that anything of his possessions was his own.

II. Yet there was no one in need among them, for

III. The faithful held all their possessions in common.

IV. Those who possessed lands and houses used to sell them, and

V. Lay the money at the feet of the Apostles.

VI. It was then distributed to each according to his needs.

VII. Joseph Barnabas is cited as an example.

A *prima facie* reading of these texts will give the impression that all the new converts sold whatever they possessed and gave the price thereof to the Apostles who then distributed it to each and every member of the Church according to his needs just as we do today in our religious communities. But such an interpretation raises insurmountable difficulties. First of all we are not told that the Christians sold their possessions all at once (both the present participle *πωλοῦντες* and the imperfect *ἐπίπρασκον* denote a continuous action) ; secondly, such a mode of living in a community of about ten thousand people would have required an immense organization of which we have no hint in our sources ; Joseph Barnabas (= son of exhortation !) is cited as an example, which would have been out of place had all done like him ; and lastly, St. Peter tells Ananias explicitly: « While it (= the land he sold) yet remained, did it not remain thine own ; and when it had been sold, was not the money at thy disposal ? » (5, 4). There was therefore no obligation whatsoever to sell one's property, and, in fact, we see even fervent Christians possessing houses of their own (12, 12).

How, then, are we to imagine this life in common ?

The fervour of these first Christians was so great that it was impossible for them to hold fast to their possessions.

This phenomenon was so general that even the less fervent wanted to imitate the example of the rest (Ananias and Sapphira). They therefore considered their whole property as virtually belonging to the whole community. The rich among them used to sell their superfluous possessions (*πᾶς* = all, does not always have

the significance of entire in St. Luke), and give the money thereof to the Apostles, who from this common deposit gave out alms to the poor and widows according to their needs (Acts 6, 1). There was no « vow of poverty » in the modern sense of the word, but an overflow of charity. Most probably, there must have been many who took the words of the Master « Go, sell all thou hast, and give to the poor » (Mt. 19, 21) without any limitation, actually selling all they had and dedicating themselves entirely to the service of the Lord.

Such a community of goods was not a new thing to the Jews of the period. We know of a sect in Damascus whose members held all they had in common ; and the recently discovered Qumran manuscripts furnish us with minute details regarding another sect that led a very strict monastic life on the shores of the Dead Sea, about six miles from Jericho. The latest excavations under the leadership of the learned Dominican scholar Fr. de Vaux have also brought to light the monastery in which they lived. These « monks » could not possess anything of their own, but all they had, either material or intellectual, belonged to the community. To each one distribution was made from day to day according to his needs. Like our modern monastic Orders they dedicated themselves to work and prayer in common (with one accord !). This institution was already in existence during the second Century B. C., and only ceased to exist in the year A. D. 68 ; both the Apostles, therefore, and the first Christians knew about it. The members must not have been too numerous — 1100 sepulchres have been unearthed till now. But what is of the greatest interest to us is that everything we have read about the primitive Church, prayers in common, community of goods etc., is to be found in a much stricter form among the members of this sect. Can we speak of Qumranic influence on the first converts ? Whatever these similarities may lead us to believe, one thing stands firm : in this community the strictest Pharisaism reigned, inextricately bound to a very unchristian despotism towards all who did not belong to the sect. The « joyful simplicity of heart » of the first Christians, as well as their free mingling with their Jewish fellow-countrymen were certainly not Qumranic.

To sum up, we can envision our primitive Christians singing hymns and psalms in the temple, gaining grace and strength from the Eucharist, which they celebrated in their private homes, and

overflowing with love of God and neighbour. No sacrifice was too arduous for their unlimited charity. They were prepared to detach themselves from their dearest possessions to come to the help of the poor and needy. No wonder then, that they « found favour with the whole people, and the Lord added to the company day by day those who were being saved » (2, 47).

But alas, this initial fervour was not to last forever. « Apart from similitude and parable the spirit of 'fellowship' animates the whole of the New Testament. The history of Christianity would have been very different if the same spirit had continued to be the predominant influence. But events belied the early promise. The four great notes of the Apostolic times were all infringed or broken within the memory of the generation which upheld them. 1) The teaching of the Apostles was challenged by false Apostles (Rev. 2, 2), by Judaisers (Gal. 1, 6), and by adversaries like Phygelus and Hermogenes and Diotrophes (2 Tim. 1, 15 ; 3 Jn. 9) ; 2) the earliest contention in the Church arose from a dispute concerning the daily distribution of food (Acts 6, 1) ; 3) the Eucharist itself gave occasion to abuse and scandals (1 Cor. 11, 20) ; 4) and we learn from the Epistle of the Hebrews of neglect by some of the daily prayers of the Church (Heb. 10, 25) » ⁹⁾.

If such a deterioration had already set in during the first Christian generation, conditions were still worse at the end of the fourth Century when St. Augustine opened his eyes to the Faith. The Church was troubled by schisms and heresies ; the peace which the Christians enjoyed in the Roman Empire had added many unworthy members to their number ; the charity which Christ had come to preach on Earth was in danger of losing its fervour. When Augustine read our passage in the Acts of the Apostles he experienced a nostalgic feeling towards that pure disinterested mode of life of the primitive Church.

Was it possible to renew this ideal in the Church ? Augustine knew that he could not put his ideal into practice in the whole Church, but he could revive it within the Church. He would found a community which would be an incarnation of the ideal unity of the Church, a symbol of its Oneness which would become a sign of contradiction to those who hated its unity.

« Unde et ille unus sanabatur in piscina. Respondeant nobis et exponant, qui insultant nomini monachorum quare ille qui inven-

⁹⁾ A. CARR, o. c. p. 464.

tus est triginta annos habens in infirmitate, hoc respondisse Domino : ' Cum mota fuerit aqua non habeo qui deponat me ; alius ante me descendit (Jn. 5, 5. 7) '. Descenderat unus, jam alius non descenderat. Unus solus sanabatur ; unitatem Ecclesiae figurabat. Merito insultant nomini unitatis qui se ab unitate praeciderunt. Merito illis displicet nomen monachorum, quia illi nolunt habitare in unum cum fratribus, sed sequentes Donatum, Christum dimiserunt » ¹⁰).

The monastery is a school of fraternal charity. The imitation of the primitive Church has but one end, Love. « *Primum* propter quod in unum estis congregati, ut unanimes habitetis in domo et sit vobis anima una et cor unum in Deo » ¹¹). It is this very unity of love which gives « monks » their name :

« *Monos* enim dicitur : et non unus quomodocumque ; nam et in turba est unus, sed una cum multis unus dici potest, *monos* dici non potest, id est, solus : *monos* enim unus solus est. Qui ergo sic vivunt in unum, ut unum hominem faciant, ut sit illis vere quod scriptum est, ' una anima et unum cor ' ; multa corpora sed non multae animae ; multa corpora sed non multa corda ; recte dicitur *monos*, id est unus solus » ¹²).

The material prerequisite for this unity is community of possessions. This is the foundation of all brotherly love and concord. It is true that one must already love to give all one has, but this is done that one may love even more. What the early Christians did because they were perfect in charity, the follower of Augustine imitates that he may possess perfect *κοινωνία*. Augustine gave a very strict interpretation to the passages in the Acts of the Apostles. His was the strictest community of goods where no one was permitted to possess anything that he might call his own. What had been impossible to the large community of Jerusalem became possible to Augustine's small circle of friends. Interpreting the spirit rather than the letter, Augustine gave us an excellent example of how the spirit can be more thorough than the letter. What was permitted in the Church of Jerusalem was not allowed in Augustine's community : « Et non dicatis aliquid proprium, sed sint vobis omnia communia » he writes in the opening chapter of his Rule ¹³), and he was prepared to take no risks in practice :

¹⁰) In Ps. 132, 6. P. L. 37, 1753.

¹¹) *Regula* I.

¹²) In Ps. 132, 6. P. L. 37, 1752.

¹³) *Regula* I.

« Si quis dilector et laudator noster apud detractorem nostrum praedicaret istam societatem et diceret : Cum episcopo Augustino sic vivunt omnes cohabitatores ejus, quomodo scriptum est in Actibus Apostolorum : continuo ille detractor caput movens, dentem promovens, diceret, Ita vere sic ibi vivitur, quomodo tu dicis ? Quare mentiris ? ... Nuntio ergo vobis unde gaudeatis. Omnes fratres et clericos meos, qui mecum habitant, presbyteros, diaconos, subdiaconos, et Patricium nepotem meum, tales inveni, quales desideravi. Sed qui de sua qualicumque paupertate, quod statuerant nondum fecerunt, hi sunt, Valens diaconus, et paulo ante dictus nepos meus subdiaconus, sed matris vita impendebat, quia inde vivebat » ¹⁴).

Common life, however, does not only consist in community of goods. All daily actions take place in common, and certain details might even seem superfluous unless interpreted in the light of Augustine's ideal. « Vestes vestras in unum habete » ¹⁵), he writes, but even this is an integral part of the 'anima una et cor unum'.

We have seen that Augustine appeals to the Acts of the Apostles for his ideal of common life. But as we saw in our analysis, it was not only community of goods that was practised in the primitive Church. Prayer, the Eucharist, and perseverance in the teaching of the Apostles also played a conspicuous part in the life of the early Christians. Yet Augustine never writes « Orationibus instate horis et temporibus constitutis, quia sic scriptum est in Actibus Apostolorum ». In fact, he never appeals to Acts 2, 42-47, although it is by far the richer passage. The reason for this is quite simple. The Eucharist, prayer, and the teaching of the Apostles had never ceased to be the dearest possessions of the Church. There was no need to go back to the primitive Church to find an ideal of prayer. What had been lost through change of circumstances was life in common, and it was only that which needed renewal. This is also the reason why only Acts 4, 31-37, in which life in common is so minutely described, attracted the attention of Augustine's social personality.

However, if Augustine does not appeal to the Acts for an ideal of prayer etc., these are none the less to be found in his community. « Orationibus instate horis et temporibus constitutis » ¹⁶). The Eucharist of course, had never ceased to be the centre of Christian

¹⁴) *Sermo* 356, 2. 3. P. L. 39, 1575.

¹⁵) *Regula* VIII.

¹⁶) *Regula* III.

piety ; and study — which is but a form of perseverance in the teaching of the Apostles — seems to have been the hobby of Augustine's community. Here is how Augustine describes their life in practice :

« Sic et in illa vita communi fratrum, quae est in monasterio : magni viri, sancti, quotidie in hymnis, in orationibus, in laudibus Dei, inde vivunt, cum lectione illis res est ; laborant manibus suis, inde se transigunt ; non avare aliquid petunt, quidquid eis infertur a piis fratribus, cum sufficientia et cum charitate utuntur ; nemo sibi usurpat aliquid quod alter non habeat ; omnes se diligunt, omnes invicem se sustinent » ¹⁷).

This was, therefore, Augustine's ideal. It has also been the ideal of myriads of Augustinians all over the world for over fifteen centuries. It is they who try to keep alive the fire which burned in the hearts of the early Christians, in the specific way of imitating their life in common. As it was for Augustine, the life of the Church of Jerusalem is for them also the highest ideal. That is why it has been described with such detail in this essay. « Audistis quid velimus, orate ut possimus »

Prosper GRECH, O. S. A.

¹⁷) In Ps. 99, 12. P. L. 37, 1278. For a full exposition of the monastic ideal of St. Augustine cf. A. ZUMKELLER OESA, *Das Mönchtum des Hl. Augustinus*, Würzburg, 1950, presently being translated into English.