

CAMBRIDGE CLASSICAL JOURNAL
PROCEEDINGS OF THE CAMBRIDGE PHILOLOGICAL SOCIETY
SUPPLEMENTARY VOLUME 35

UNCLASSICAL TRADITIONS

VOLUME II: PERSPECTIVES FROM EAST AND WEST IN LATE ANTIQUITY

edited by

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'Beloved Lord and Honourable Brother': the negotiation of status in Augustine, *Letter 23*

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The remarkable prominence of letter writing in late antiquity – or perhaps more accurately, of the collecting and publishing of letters – has recently begun to receive the close and sustained attention it deserves.¹ As part of this developing interest, calls have been made for scholars to focus in particular on 'the rhetoric of the epistolary genre': that is, on the protocol and conventions which governed the exchange of letters in antiquity.² This cannot, of course, be a matter of identifying hard-and-fast rules to which authors all inevitably conformed.³ Instead, it demands an awareness of both the conventions themselves and also their 'creative manipulation' by authors who proposed and defined rules of their own.⁴ This complex interaction of content and form, and of context and tradition, must very often be inferred from the gaps and silences detectable in a letter or a correspondence. Yet there are occasions – perhaps unrepresentative, but nevertheless revealing many of the conventional assumptions – in which matters of protocol become part of the conversation.⁵ One such example may be found among the earliest surviving letters of Augustine of Hippo: *Letter 23*, which sees him negotiating a difficult question of social and ecclesiastical status by means of a self-conscious attention to the usual formulas of polite epistolary exchange.⁶

In this letter – one of very few in which we can glimpse Augustine early in his ecclesiastical career, as a priest in the church at Hippo – it is possible to recognise the intricate interplay between classical epistolary practice and the demands of the world of North African Christianity in which Augustine operated. Certainly, despite the adherence

¹ As noted by Ebbeler (2009) 271: some recent examples of such an approach include Conybeare (2000) on Paulinus of Nola, Cain (2009) on Jerome and Ebbeler (forthcoming) on Augustine.

² Ebbeler (2009) 272, citing Van Dam (2003) 132; rephrased as 'the rhetoric of epistolography' at Ebbeler (2009) 273.

³ Letters, after all, are a notoriously amorphous genre: detailed discussion of the various problems involved may be found in Constable (1976) and Stowers (1986).

⁴ Ebbeler (2009) 273.

⁵ Augustine's correspondence with Jerome is the best example, and has been dealt with in great detail in Ebbeler (2007), (2009); Hennings (1994); Fürst (1999).

⁶ A similar exercise in commenting on a single letter of Augustine's (*Ep.* 151) was undertaken by James J. O'Donnell in 1995, and may be found online at <http://www9.georgetown.edu/faculty/jod/augustine/explan.html>. As far as I am aware, no print version of this piece was ever published.

to classical rhetoric and tradition, there was scope within late-antique epistolography to introduce avowedly Christian innovations. Augustine, indeed, would prove a notable innovator.⁷ And in this early letter he can be seen beginning to exploit the tension between classical and Christian conventions as a means of manoeuvring the exchange to his own advantage. Traditional forms of address are newly explained with reference to the Scriptures; and the potential disjunction between classical and Christian *mores* allows important terms to be redefined. The rhetoric of epistolography was here pushed firmly into the foreground. Augustine's letter thus offers a neat demonstration of how a clever correspondent could make rhetorical use of the friction between the classical inheritance and the rise of alternative, unclassical traditions.

Letter 23 in Augustine's collection was composed at some point during the three or four years following his ordination as priest at the hands of Valerius, bishop of Hippo.⁸ Augustine was a recent convert to Christianity at the time of his ordination, and, by his own account, he had felt himself too inexperienced with the Scriptures and with the demands of the role to be a proper candidate for a clerical position.⁹ Moreover, although Augustine had been raised and educated in North Africa, he had spent much of his recent life in Rome and Milan, and on his return from abroad risked appearing as something of an interloper. Nevertheless, Valerius evidently judged that Augustine would become a vital asset to the see of Hippo, perhaps in part because the ageing bishop was himself an outsider: a Greek, with none of Augustine's practised eloquence in written and spoken Latin. Indeed, so effective was Augustine that he soon found himself serving as the public face of Valerius' church, with the bishop contravening normal African practice in allowing his presbyter to preach, and even – it seems – allowing Augustine to write official letters in his place.¹⁰

Augustine's later appointment as coadjutor bishop in 395 was therefore only a recognition of this reality: that, even as a priest, Augustine had taken over many functions that should strictly have been denied him. This was a situation which required Augustine to exercise a certain level of tact: to remember that although he had once been a professional orator at the court of the western emperor, in the context of North African Christianity he stood at the very bottom of the clerical hierarchy. For a priest to preach and write in place of his bishop was itself to invite accusations of an overreaching authority;

⁷ As discussed in Ebbeler (2009) especially 273–7.

⁸ Text ed. A. Goldbacher, CSEL 34; Augustine's reference to himself as 'presbyter ecclesiae catholicae' (23.1) places this letter sometime between his ordination in 391 and his appointment as coadjutor bishop in 395.

⁹ Ep. 21 articulates Augustine's concerns at the time; the story of his reluctant ordination was later told in his *Sermon* 355 and in Possidius, *Vita Augustini* 4 (ed. A. Bastiaensen).

¹⁰ Poss. *V. Aug.* 5; P. Brown (2000) 132–4.

and it opened Augustine up to a charge of metropolitan arrogance. That the local clergy were highly sensitive to such matters would subsequently be proved when the ratification of Augustine as successor to Valerius was temporarily delayed. His appointment as coadjutor, it was noted, had been technically a violation of the canons of the Council of Nicaea, and this impropriety was a weapon in the hands of those who felt that the young man was being unfairly fast-tracked into the episcopate.¹¹ From the beginning, then, Augustine would have been aware of the dangers of disregarding proper protocol. He could not afford to appear as anything less than scrupulously polite to his ecclesiastical superiors.

Yet if Augustine as a priest was already serving at a disadvantage, then the purpose and the recipient of his *Letter 23* will have made the problem even more acute. For Valerius, at the time of Augustine's ordination, had been bishop of only one of the two rival Christian churches in the town of Hippo – and, in fact, of the smaller of them.¹² Christianity in North Africa had long been divided between two opposed ecclesiastical factions: one, Augustine's, was in communion with the church at Rome and claimed to represent the universal, 'catholic' church; the other, while not abandoning such claims, was heavily concentrated in North Africa. The first traced its authority through Caecilian, the early fourth-century bishop of Carthage; the second denied his legitimacy and promoted instead his episcopal rival Donatus. The claims of the 'Caecilianists', thanks in large part to Augustine, would come to win the effective backing of the Roman authorities; but it should not be forgotten that even at the end of the fourth century their position was far less favourable. Their insistence that they were the only true church must often have seemed absurd; and Donatism, if not exactly a national or populist movement, could nevertheless claim to be both popular and indigenous.¹³ Augustine's later fame as a theologian and bishop should not blind us to the weakness of his institutional position at this early stage. As a new priest, he represented a beleaguered Caecilianist minority in Hippo, surrounded by long-standing Donatist communities.

It is therefore significant that Augustine's *Letter 23* was addressed to Maximinus of Siniti, the established Donatist bishop of a neighbouring see.¹⁴ For one thing, the Donatist clergy were mostly local figures intimately familiar with the problems and preferences of

¹¹ P. Brown (2000) 198–9.

¹² See *ibid.* 210 on the relative positions of the two factions in North Africa.

¹³ On the early development of the Donatist controversy, see Frend (1971), with an alternative chronology proposed in Barnes (1975). Frend argued that Donatism was (in some ways) a popular nationalist movement, a position restated and refined in Frend (1997); certainly it is clear that Donatists were particularly strong in the smaller towns and the countryside: see especially P. Brown (1968) 92–3, (2000) 137; Markus (1972), (2003); Shaw (1992); Tilley (1997). Both Markus and Shaw emphasise that the term 'Donatist' was an external imposition on a group who considered themselves to be orthodox Christians; I have used that label here for the sake of clarity, but have chosen to follow O'Donnell (2005) in rejecting 'Catholic' in favour of 'Caecilianist'.

¹⁴ For the relationship between Hippo and Siniti, see Lancel (1984) 1097–1103.

their own Christian communities. Few correspondents could have rendered Augustine's clerical inexperience and upstart authority any more of a liability. Moreover, as a priest writing to a bishop, and perhaps trespassing on his own bishop's privileges in the process, Augustine found himself at a double disadvantage. That Augustine was aware of this handicap is clear: he concludes the letter by apologising for seeming to usurp the role of Valerius, and admitting that he writes neither at his bishop's command nor with his explicit permission.¹⁵ Maximinus in turn would surely have been thoroughly justified in ignoring Augustine's approach as beneath his dignity. And, in addition, these problems had all to be negotiated in the manner of a public performance: for, as had so often been the case in classical epistolography, Augustine's *Letter 23* anticipated a wider audience.¹⁶

The chief complication, however, was the precise nature of the divide between Caecilianists and Donatists. For the vital point at issue was not theological, but institutional. The Donatists denied the legitimacy of the Caecilianist clergy and of the sacraments they carried out; and their own clergy in turn were regarded as illegitimate by the Caecilianists. This dispute, indeed, was at the heart of Augustine's letter. The immediate point concerned the rebaptism of a Caecilianist deacon into the Donatist church, to which Augustine was bound to object; and yet he appears to have been determined not only to redress this specific injustice, but also to emphasise his fundamental rejection of Maximinus' ecclesiastical authority. Thus, although the ostensible purpose of Augustine's letter was diplomatic, and for all that he was required to abide by the rules of epistolary politeness, in broader terms the letter represents an early attempt on his part to engage with the specifically North African problem of Donatism in his new role as an official representative of the Caecilianist church. And from the beginning he can be seen to have taken an unwavering line: that however politely they may be treated, the Donatist clergy of North Africa possessed no genuine ecclesiastical authority.

As Peter Brown has argued, therefore, Augustine's apparently diplomatic approach in his early letters to his Donatist counterparts was often self-interested: 'he wished to take the initiative in this situation without incurring the odium of appearing as an aggressor'.¹⁷ By taking advantage of the potential for slippage between classical and Christian terms of address, Augustine would prove able to write letters which gave a public impression of polite deference, but which nevertheless constructed the Donatists of North Africa as

¹⁵ *Ep.* 23.8: 'episcopus meus Benevolentiae tuae fortasse potius litteras misisset, si esset praesens, aut ego illo uel iubente uel permittente scripsissem.'

¹⁶ Stowers (1986) 19. *Ep.* 23.3 and 23.6 make it clear that this was intended from the start as an open letter, and that it would be read out in the town square with or without Maximinus' reply. The extent to which this wider audience affected Augustine's approach to letter writing is neatly captured in Miles (2008) 138–41.

¹⁷ P. Brown (1964) 109.

(among other things) errant family members in need of firm guidance and correction by their Caecilianist brethren. Even as a new priest, confronting all of the obstacles that faced a junior official in an established hierarchy, and whose cosmopolitan personal history might give rise to suspicion and jealousy, Augustine was immediately able to demonstrate his ability to manipulate and redirect the conventions of classical epistolography. And in a letter which might have seemed merely the occasion for a polite, uncontentious inquiry, Augustine was prepared to take a first step in redefining the wider relationship between Caecilianists and Donatists in North Africa.

* * *

The case that Augustine had to deal with in *Letter 23* was a delicate one. A deacon of the church of Hippo had gone over to the Donatist cause; in the process he had (allegedly) been rebaptised into the Donatist church by Maximinus himself.¹⁸ Augustine, however, chose to frame his response as an attack on the practice of rebaptism in general, skirting around his deacon's indiscretion and what was evidently a complex local dispute, and retreating instead into his preferred territory of doctrine and theology. The deacon's actions, indeed, become little more than a pretext for a proposed public debate on rebaptism – an outcome which would have played neatly to Augustine's own strengths while distracting from his pastoral inexperience. This fondness for public debate should therefore be interpreted less as a desire for a peaceful and diplomatic resolution, than as an attempt on the part of Augustine to seize control of the terms of the dispute.¹⁹ Certainly Maximinus would have had little to gain in agreeing to a public debate with a rhetorically sophisticated young priest of a minority faction. But even though he was unlikely to find the opportunity for any such set-piece debate, Augustine can be found already taking the initiative in the opening paragraph of this letter. Even before he addressed the precise point at issue between himself and Maximinus, Augustine was carefully managing and presenting their relationship by explaining at length his chosen terms of address.

It is immediately obvious that Augustine in this letter paid unusually close attention to matters of protocol: indeed, his self-conscious reflection on his chosen salutation takes up the entirety of the opening paragraph.²⁰ It is in this short passage that Augustine

¹⁸ *Ep.* 23.2.

¹⁹ P. Brown (1964) 109: 'Such attempts at local conferences plainly suited Augustine's temperament, as well as his circumstances.' Brown goes on to point out that this also offered an excuse to set aside other specific grievances, especially regarding the use of violence; this suggestion is made at *Ep.* 23.6–7.

²⁰ It should be noted that this self-consciousness became a habit of Augustine's when addressing Donatists: other examples may be found in *Ep.* 33 and 51 (although the salutation for the latter does not survive). In both cases, however, Augustine's comment is much more perfunctory: as he was a bishop when he composed these later letters, he could perhaps afford to be less defensive.

attempts to negotiate his status in relation to Maximinus, and it is worth examining in detail. The salutation is at first glance unexceptionable: 'To his most beloved Lord and Honourable Brother, Maximinus, Augustine, priest of the Catholic church, sends greetings in the Lord' (23.1).²¹ All of these titles and adjectives are proper to both classical and Christian epistolography, but Augustine proves unwilling to let them stand. He therefore immediately – in the first sentence of his letter – defers the main business at hand in order to 'give an account of the salutation of this letter lest it disturb you or anyone else' (23.1). He continues:

'Lord, I wrote because it is written: *You have been called to freedom, brothers; only do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love* [Galatians 5.13]. Since, then, I may serve you through love even by this very act of writing a letter, I call you 'Lord' without any absurdity on account of our one and true Lord who gave us these commands (23.1).

Augustine rushes to withdraw what was ordinarily a fairly innocuous term of address. It seems to have been Augustine's usual practice to address clergymen and lay officials as *domine*, as though it were a title to be accorded them by default; those clerics for whom he chose not to use it were mainly friends and close colleagues such as Alypius and Profuturus.²² In the case of Maximinus, however, Augustine is at pains to emphasise that his use of the term *dominus* is to be justified wholly on the basis of the scriptural command to 'serve one another', a duty which Augustine could claim to have discharged in the mere act of writing a letter.²³ The Christian language with which Augustine explains away his terms of address in fact disguises a return to classical practice, in which the term *domine* was polite but distant, 'conveying courtesy but little or no deference'.²⁴ Maximinus, in other words, is addressed neither as an office-holder nor as a friend, but with a studied neutrality which renders him nothing more than the most ordinary of correspondents.

²¹ 'domino dilectissimo et honorabili fratri Maximino, Augustinus presbyter ecclesiae catholicae in Domino salutem.'

²² O'Brien (1930) 83 notes that *dominus* is, in Christian letters, 'the most common form of address to ecclesiastics of all kinds'. Examples of Augustine's use of the term to address the clergy may be found in *Ep.* 21 (to Valerius, bishop of Hippo), 28 (to Jerome, then a priest in Bethlehem, at the start of their long correspondence) and 60 (to Aurelius, bishop of Carthage), and even in more conciliatory letters to Donatists (for example *Ep.* 44; but cf. *Ep.* 33 to Proculeianus, the Donatist bishop of Hippo, where the usage is notably self-conscious); it is addressed to lay officials or dignitaries in *Ep.* 35 (to Eusebius, a local dignitary: Martindale [1980] 429), 86 (to Caecilianus, vicar or proconsul of Africa: Martindale [1980] 244–6) and 89 (to Festus, an unknown official: Martindale [1980] 466–7); and to a group of Donatist leaders – probably laymen, perhaps officials – in *Ep.* 43 and 44. Augustine does not use *dominus* in addressing Alypius (*Ep.* 83) or Profuturus (*Ep.* 38), although both were bishops at the time: but Alypius was a close friend and Profuturus had been known to Augustine in Hippo. The same is perhaps true of Casulanus (*Ep.* 36) and Deogratias (*Ep.* 102), and the other clergy in Augustine's letters not addressed as *dominus*.

²³ See Stowers (1986) 28–9 for the idea of the letter as a gift or service to the recipient.

²⁴ Dickey (2002) 91, with full discussion at 89–96; note also the suggestion (at 96) that the vocative *domine* in particular came to be widely adopted under the Roman empire as a neutral form of address, equivalent to the modern English 'Mr' or 'Dear Sir'.

The complication here is of course the position of Donatism. Given the mutual refusal of the two factions to acknowledge each other's clergy, Augustine was understandably reluctant to admit that his opponent was a bishop at all. Certainly to admit as much in a public letter would leave his words open to unwelcome interpretations from all sides. Thus an awareness of the existence of an audience ready to seize on any such concession must be part of the explanation for Augustine's rather tortuous elaboration of the term *dominus*; and yet the effort to which he was required to go must end up seeming quite disproportionate. It would, after all, have been far more straightforward simply to avoid the problematic title phrase entirely. His decision to give ground and then take it away is a testament to the awkwardness of his position, but also to his determination to alter that position until it lay in his favour. Augustine was evidently not prepared to ignore the requirements of epistolary protocol; instead, he took advantage of the Christian re-interpretation of lordship and servitude to redefine it in terms which removed the important point of contention. In so doing he was able to reach a compromise, addressing Maximinus as *dominus* in a manner which at the same time allowed him to avoid committing himself to any recognition of his claim to episcopal status.

Augustine has avoided appearing openly disrespectful, and yet has made a significant point; and he seems to do much the same in his very next comment, in which he further qualifies the entirely uncontentious term *dilectissimus*: 'But as for "most beloved", which I have written, God knows that I not only love you, but love you as myself; since indeed I am well aware that I desire the same goods for you as for myself' (23.1).²⁵ The blow here is rather more disguised, but the point is presumably that adherence to the Caecilianist church is one of the goods which Augustine desires, both for himself and for Maximinus. But there is much less pretence that the issue is anything other than Maximinus' episcopal status in the subsequent explanation of his term *honorabilis*:

As for 'honourable', which I also added, I did not add this to honour your episcopacy. For you are not my bishop [*mihi enim episcopus non es*]: nor should you consider this as said with contempt, but rather in the spirit according to which we ought always to be ready to say, *What is, is; what is not, is not* [*Matthew 5.37; James 5.12*]. For you are not unaware, nor is any human being who knows us unaware, that you are neither my bishop nor I your priest (23.1).

There is nevertheless some equivocation here. Augustine explicitly states that he is not using the term *honorabilis* as an episcopal title, but he does stop short of asserting that Maximinus is not a bishop at all.²⁶ Instead he wriggles out of the question by noting that

²⁵ The term *dilectissimus* is 'found very often in Augustine': O'Brien (1930) 100–101. But it is very rarely taken back.

²⁶ O'Brien (1930) 145 agrees that this passage firmly implies that *honorabilis* was 'the accepted title for bishops' – at least in late-antique North Africa – but is perhaps over-hasty in suggesting that in his use of the term Augustine is not to be found 'discriminating between Donatists and Catholics'; cf. Augustine's similar self-consciousness in using the term to address Proculeianus, the Donatist bishop of Hippo, in *Ep.* 33.

Maximinus is not a bishop in Hippo, and is not Augustine's direct superior, and therefore need not be addressed by him as a bishop. This unconvincing argument is supported by an unconvincing citation of scripture – even more stark in the Latin, *est, est; non, non* – which Augustine here exploits as a means of shutting down any deliberation on the subtleties of the case.

There is enough here, I think, to give rise to a suspicion of irony on Augustine's part, or at least a kind of deliberate insincerity. The possibility is made more plausible as he goes on to explain exactly why he calls Maximinus 'honourable', in a pious phrase which ends in a significant caveat: 'I therefore willingly call you honourable on the basis of this rule: that I know you are a human being and ... [therefore] placed in a position of honour by the very order and law of nature, if by understanding what must be understood he preserves his honour' (23.1). Maximinus, it seems, is honourable on account of his humanity; but his honour and even his humanity might be forfeit if he fails to show sufficient understanding – a threat Augustine supports with an apt quotation from the *Psalms*.²⁷ That this understanding concerns the Donatist schism and consequent alienation from the true church is then made clear: 'Why, then, should I not call you honourable inasmuch as you are a human being, especially since I dare not give up hope concerning your salvation and correction as long as you are in this life?' (23.1). Augustine leaves no room for doubt that he considers Maximinus in need of 'salvation and correction'; and yet Maximinus is an honourable man. Augustine's tactic throughout this opening paragraph of offering honours and snatching them away seems unlikely to encourage Maximinus to take seriously such concessions as Augustine allows him. Augustine's painstaking avoidance of any irrevocable commitment may indeed be understood as ironic – or at least, as a means of manipulating his audience so as to disguise his own vulnerability.

Thus Augustine's pointed inclusion in his salutation of the titles and honorifics which were owed to a respectable bishop leaves little room for Maximinus or anyone sympathetic to him to complain that he is being treated irreverently. At the same time, adherents to the Caecilianist faction which Augustine was representing would find any objection they might have had to the granting of episcopal titles answered by means of their immediate retraction. And yet, the retraction is overtly presented by Augustine not as an insult but as a compliment to Maximinus: he is called 'Lord' and 'Honourable' not on account of his office but in his own person. The irony, if that is how we read it, is subtle enough that Augustine's Caecilianist partisans can flatter themselves that they are 'understanding hearers', or rather sophisticated readers in on the joke, while Maximinus

²⁷ *Psalms* 49.21: 'Though placed in a position of honour, man did not understand; he has been made equal to mindless animals and has become like them.'

and his own supporters may perfectly well 'know what is going on' but nevertheless 'dare not complain' – or else risk raising the unattractively petty objection that Maximinus is being given the wrong kind of compliment.²⁸ Moreover, the position is the same even if Augustine is being painfully sincere. Ultimately, what this rhetorical strategy achieves is deniability. Augustine can defend himself against accusations of impertinence by pointing out that he has not only used the proper titles but justified them in terms of biblical tradition; and against accusations of pandering to the Donatists, he can point to his reinterpretation of the titles as belonging to Maximinus the man and not the Donatist bishop. Having promised to explain his salutation 'lest it upset you or anyone else', Augustine has anticipated and countered the most likely complaints of his most hostile readers.

* * *

Augustine's ability to combine an adherence to formal courtesy with a subtle reorientation of his relationship with Maximinus is thus on display throughout the salutation and the opening paragraph. In the very first phrase of the letter, as he is announcing his intention to clarify his salutation, Augustine addresses Maximinus as 'Your Benevolence' (23.1). This form of address is very rare indeed outside of Augustine, and in Augustine himself it is most often reserved for prominent laymen.²⁹ The exception to this rule is in Augustine's letters to various Donatist bishops, who are repeatedly addressed with this title: and as in the case of Maximinus, it is difficult to see this as anything other than a pointed reminder of their illegitimate status in the eyes of Augustine and his church.³⁰ Augustine, however, did not persist with this approach to Maximinus, and by the end of his first paragraph he has instead turned to the more familiar but less deferential 'Your Fraternity' (23.1). This form of address is also not unattested outside of Augustine, but Augustine's use of it in this letter seems to be the only known example of a priest thus addressing a bishop.³¹ And although 'Your Benevolence' would return at the very end, Augustine would consistently employ the language of fraternity to address Maximinus for the remainder of the letter.

²⁸ Empson (1975) 178 offers an anatomy of this kind of irony, which he considers 'the basic situation' of the trope, and gives as an example Alexander Pope's 'Epistle to Augustus'.

²⁹ O'Brien (1930) 41: discounting a descriptive use by Jerome (preserved in Augustine's collection as *Ep.* 72.3), the only other usage she records is by Caesarius of Arles to Ruricius in his letter 'Dum nimium' (*Ep. ad Ruricium* 7 [ed. A. Goldbacher, CSEL 21]), and thus from one bishop to another.

³⁰ O'Brien (1930) 41: Augustine, *Ep.* 23, 33, 61 and 108 are to Donatists; the only one of O'Brien's examples which does not conform to the pattern is a usage at the very end of *Ep.* 84, to Novatus.

³¹ O'Brien (1930) 58–9: the only other example of an inferior addressing a superior with this title is *Collectio Avellana* 195 (ed. O. Günther, CSEL 35), to Pope Hormisdas. Augustine uses the form only twice: the other example is in *Ep.* 52 to Severinus, a Donatist but also a blood relation of Augustine.

Thus of the forms of address initially offered, Augustine provides unexpected interpretations of 'most beloved', 'Lord' and 'Honourable'; but his attitude is notably different with regard to the final title, 'brother'. Rather than disavowing the use of *frater*, Augustine explicitly adopts it as a means of setting out a new model for the two men's correspondence. Fraternity was an eminently classical ideal as well as a cornerstone of Christian ideology: but although it might have appeared a friendly concession on Augustine's part, it had significant implications. Augustine could once again take advantage of a combination of classical and unclassical interpretations in order to renegotiate his relationship with Maximinus – and, more broadly, with the Donatist church. This unilateral redefinition of terms would of course turn out to be firmly in Augustine's own interest, but the movement was sufficiently subtle as to make it difficult for Maximinus to object.

Certainly the use of *frater* was by no means unusual. In classical letters it is to be found in Fronto, and outside of the epistolary tradition its use as a term of address can be seen in Cicero, Petronius, Martial and Apuleius.³² Outside of this aristocratic milieu, it was a term used very often between military and administrative officials – as for example in letters from Vindolanda, or (extending the usage into Greek) in the fourth-century letter collection of Flavius Abinnaeus – and in all of these the use of *frater* 'need imply no actual relationship'.³³ All the same, there is clearly a fictive assertion of kinship in the use of the term, and that in itself is enough to make clear that it was conventionally friendly, although even then perhaps so conventional as to be 'no more than mildly polite'.³⁴ Most importantly, however, in all of these cases the use of *frater* recognises or implies a fundamental equality between the correspondents. As an attempt to define the nature of the relationship, this form of address amounts to politeness if there is indeed very little difference in status; and if used of an inferior, *frater* is a definite concession.³⁵ As may be imagined, however, it is rather less flattering if the reverse is the case: addressed to a superior, or 'to someone who thinks of himself as the speaker's superior and would prefer to keep his distance', the use of *frater* would be impolite and presumptuous.³⁶ Interpreted in the classical manner, therefore, it is a term rather less deferential than the others used in Augustine's salutation.

³² Fronto, *Ad amicos* 1.8 (to Passienus Rufus); Dickey (2002) 123–4. Cicero's letters to his brother are, of course, examples of the literal use.

³³ Bowman et al. (1990) 34 on, for example, late first-century *Tab. Vind.* 310 (Chrauttius to Veldedeius); Bell et al. (1962) 25: κύριοι ἀδελφοί. In the case of the Vindolanda letters, it cannot be ruled out entirely that the correspondents were in fact related by blood.

³⁴ Dickey (2002) 123.

³⁵ *ibid.* 123–4.

³⁶ *ibid.* 124.

Of course, *frater* also had its place within a specifically Christian tradition and, along with similar kinship terms, was very common in all Christian writers – not least in Augustine's own letters. In Africa, such usage had behind it the considerable authority of Cyprian of Carthage, who during the times of persecution had sought to emphasise the collegiate nature of the church of which he was the head and representative.³⁷ Thus by Augustine's time, the term *frater* was firmly established in Christian usage: 'popes and bishops addressed each other as *frater*, and the bishops apply it to the lower clergy.'³⁸ It may be noted, however, that the reverse case less often applies. Clergymen in late antiquity are rarely to be found addressing their superiors as *frater*; and on those occasions when it was used, the issue of legitimate authority is likely to have been very much at stake.³⁹ Indeed, the conventional usage of *frater* in the late-antique church would appear to have converged with its classical counterpart, in the direction of a more formalised and hierarchical understanding of relationships among bishops as a form of aristocratic brotherhood.⁴⁰

This is reflected in Augustine's own usage in his letters: as bishop he applied the term *frater* to both laymen and clergymen of equivalent age or rank, while elsewhere substituting other kinship terms as appropriate.⁴¹ Just as in a secular context, therefore, Augustine's address to Maximinus as *frater* risked being impolite, and even insulting. In the circumstances, it was surely intended to make the point that he was addressing Maximinus as an equal. Thus as with the other terms used in his salutation, it demanded further explanation in the text – in this case not because it expressed undue deference, but because it served illegitimately to raise Augustine's own status to equality with that of his correspondent. Maximinus, it must be remembered, had already seen the apparently deferential terms *dominus* and *honorabilis* redefined; and here again he was denied any elevated social status. Had Augustine been a bishop, his desire to claim Maximinus as a brother would have been rather more acceptable. But since he was only a priest, and a relatively young and inexperienced one, it must have seemed merely self-aggrandising.

Nor was Augustine unaware that his address to Maximinus was likely to be poorly received. But this combination of classical and Christian traditions was not

³⁷ O'Brien (1930) 58, noting in particular Augustine's use of the first-person *fraternitas nostra*; Schelkle (1954) 640, discussed in Ratzinger (1966) 39. Cyprian may well be deliberately recalled here: as noted in P. Brown (2000) 198, his authority was regularly appealed to by both Caecilianists and Donatists.

³⁸ O'Brien (1930) 84.

³⁹ O'Brien (1930) 84 proposes that 'no regulation seems to govern its application in either ecclesiastical or lay offices', but offers no example of an inferior addressing a superior authority with the term.

⁴⁰ Ratzinger (1966) 39.

⁴¹ Thus, for example, *Ep.* 34, 91 (laymen addressed as *frater*); 47, 56, 96 (laymen addressed as *filius*); 31, 48 (clergy addressed as *frater*); 37, 59, 65 (clergy addressed as *pater*).

uncomplicated, and within it Augustine was able to find room for manoeuvre. Thus still in his opening paragraph, having explained away the rest of his salutation, he goes on to define *frater* in terms which draw attention away from its use as an indicator of status within the clerical hierarchy. 'You are not unaware', he reminds Maximinus, 'of the divine precept by which I call you "brother"' (23.1).⁴² Such an ideology of brotherhood may be found in the Old as well as the New Testament, and its connotations can be traced over time: initially a means of distinguishing Jews from Gentiles – a purpose it retains even into the Gospels – it is found extended to the whole Christian community by the time of the Epistles.⁴³ Augustine thus makes use of this biblical precedent to deny to Maximinus any greater concession than the recognition of his status as a Christian; and yet even this might be unnecessary if the duty of brotherhood were extended to apply to all humanity. This too was a possible reading of the Scriptures, and one which had been defended by Tertullian in his *Apology* two centuries earlier: for him, Christians rightly regarded one another as brothers, but could say even to pagans that 'we are your brothers too, by the law of our common mother, nature.'⁴⁴ Thus the use of *frater* in Augustine's salutation could be explained to Maximinus in much the same way as his earlier use of *honorabilis* – as nothing more than a rather convoluted reference to their shared humanity.

This was scarcely a compliment to Maximinus, and once again it is important to recognise that Augustine was here acting unilaterally in redefining these terms. But this proved no difficulty: for, as Augustine continues, not only was brotherhood commanded by God, but 'even to those who deny that they are our brothers, we say, "You are our brothers"' (23.1).⁴⁵ Thus whether or not Maximinus was minded to accept this rewriting of the terms of engagement, Augustine could argue that he was entitled to impose it upon him. It is clear that Augustine is not overly concerned with the need to be polite to his correspondent. He is offering no genuine recognition of Maximinus' own position, but instead is primarily concerned with raising his own status and advertising his own magnanimity. Once again, Maximinus, as a Donatist, is implicitly stripped of any official authority, and is impertinently addressed as an equal, as merely an ordinary Christian – and once again he is powerless to complain. After all, he could hardly refuse to go along with Augustine's articulation of Christian brotherhood as a universal principle, especially when it had behind it the authority of the Scriptures.

⁴² '*fratrem* uero ut uocem, non te latet praeceptum nobis esse diuinitus'.

⁴³ Ratzinger (1966) 7–12, 22–37; examples of these usages may be found at *Matthew* 18.15–20 and 3 *John* 1.5–8 respectively.

⁴⁴ Tert. *Apol.* 39.8 (ed. C. Becker, 2nd edn): '*fratres* autem etiam uestri sumus iure naturae matris unius'. See also Konstan (1997) 156–8 for discussion of this idea in a classical context. That Augustine was fully aware of the examples of both Cyprian and Tertullian is overwhelmingly likely, given his open admiration for these two great African Christian predecessors: for his familiarity with these authors, see Bastiaensen (1987); Madec (1999).

⁴⁵ '*etiam* eis qui negant se fratres nostros esse, dicamus: fratres nostri estis'.

Thus for Augustine's part, this apparent politeness combined with a careful definition of his terms offered a way to circumvent the ecclesiastical hierarchy which had placed him at such a disadvantage. He was no longer an upstart Caecilianist priest, standing in for his more authoritative bishop and interfering with the affairs of his elders. Instead, by unilaterally redefining the correspondence with Maximinus in the language of brotherhood, Augustine could rhetorically place himself on an equal footing with his opponent. Augustine was able to have it both ways. His letter to Maximinus conforms, outwardly at least, to polite epistolary protocol; but its careful revision of the conventional language of late-antique letter exchange allows him to take back whatever he seems to concede. Even so respectable a figure as Maximinus could be granted respect as a human being but not as a bishop – at least not until he had seen sense and come around to the Caecilianist position.⁴⁶ The apparent friendliness and respectfulness of the language of brotherhood disguises its true implications. Augustine makes the Donatists his brothers; and takes it upon himself to act as his brother's keeper.

Finally, having established that Christian principles demanded that 'even to those who deny that they are our brothers, we say, "You are our brothers"', Augustine adds, 'this holds particularly true for the case on account of which I wished to write to Your Fraternity' (23.1). This glance ahead makes the connection between Augustine's reinterpreted salutation and the topic of the rest of his letter: the problem of Donatist rebaptism. For just as the opening paragraph of Augustine's letter to Maximinus made apparent concessions while remaining unmoved on the true point at issue, so Augustine stood firm in his attitude towards the older and more established Donatist bishops who surrounded him in Hippo – presenting any concessions he might grant them as nothing more than the result of his own magnanimity. The language of fraternity thus reflects Augustine's contemporary understanding of the proper relationship between the Caecilianist and Donatist factions in North Africa. The Donatists, for Augustine, were to be counted among those who 'dissolved the ties of brotherly love by means of iniquitous divisions.'⁴⁷ By setting themselves against the wider 'catholic' community, the Donatists had divorced themselves from their Christian family; but by condescending to address them as 'brothers' once more, Augustine could restore them to it – subject, of course, to the proper Catholic authorities.

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⁴⁶ As Maximinus appears to have done at some stage following this exchange: *Ep.* 105; *Civ. Dei* 22.8. These references however suggest that he converted after 406, when the situation had changed significantly: Lancel (2002b) 292–3.

⁴⁷ *De fide et symbolo* 10.21 (ed. J. Zycha, CSEL 41): 'dississionibus iniquis a fraterna caritate dissiliunt'. This was an address given by Augustine in 393, and therefore while still a priest, to the Caecilianist clergy assembled at Hippo: for the circumstances see Lancel (2002b) 159–60 and Augustine's own explanation of the context in *Retract.* 1.16.

It would be a mistake, then, to understand Augustine's *Letter 23* as primarily interested in friendly persuasion, or to characterise its tone as 'one of studied moderation' reflecting a concern on the part of this new young priest 'to avoid all bitterness and recrimination'.⁴⁸ Certainly this letter, like others from the same period, is 'essentially diplomatic' and 'scrupulously polite', but that should not be allowed to obscure Augustine's determination to seize control of the correspondence and of the ecclesiastical debate.⁴⁹ As Peter Brown has pointed out, far from being characterised by a sincere respect for opposing views, these letters to Donatists 'are like the diplomatic notes of one Great Power to another in a Cold War'.⁵⁰ The apparent politeness of Augustine's address to Maximinus needs to be read with attention to the retractions and the irony which give it a sharper edge.

Thus even at the beginning of his ecclesiastical career, and in what might otherwise seem an innocuous and inconclusive exchange, it is possible to see Augustine working to exploit the possibilities of Christian epistolography. By making use of the twin inheritance of classical and Christian letters he was able to trap his correspondent with terms of address which were superficially respectful and yet also open to redefinition. What appeared to be recognitions of an elevated, even episcopal status were represented instead as biblical allusions which established Maximinus as no more than merely a fellow human being. At the same time, what in classical letters would have been a faintly insulting assertion of fraternity was remodelled by means of the Christian tradition in a way that made it impossible for Maximinus to object. In each case, Augustine gained the upper hand: he flattened the existing hierarchy to which he was obliged at least to pay lip service; and in doing so he neutralised the chief disadvantage of his position as a new young priest and a relative outsider. This indeed was to throw the fight in his own favour: for once the protection of the church hierarchy was abandoned, the discussion came down to who could argue the best. It is no wonder that Augustine was so eager to move from the straitening courtesy of letter exchange into the field of public debate. In that arena, Augustine the former professor of rhetoric could be confident of outclassing his provincial opponents.

⁴⁸ Bonner (2002) 259; see also the similar remarks at Eno (1999) 309.

⁴⁹ P. Brown (1964) 109, developed in (2000) 226.

⁵⁰ P. Brown (2000) 226.