

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*Mater ecclesia* has been one of the more prevalent and unique expressions for conveying the nature and function of the church in Christian thought. Unlike other ecclesial metaphors, such as the Body of Christ or People of God, *mater ecclesia* lacks a direct scriptural antecedent. Although various maternal images exist in Scripture, none are explicitly associated with the Christian community itself.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the metaphor of *mater ecclesia* appeared suddenly in late second-century patristic literature and without explanation. Yet, once the image was introduced, patristic writers continuously employed *mater ecclesia* as an image characterizing the corporate identity of the church. Epitomized in Cyprian's oft-repeated dictum, "One cannot have God for a Father who does not have the church for a mother," patristic writers understood the church's maternity as a natural extension of God's paternity, and an individual's association with her as an absolute requirement for salvation.<sup>2</sup> The popularity of this image grew to such an extent, especially in the ancient western church, that the figure of *mater ecclesia* became the subject of not only ecclesiologically-focused treatises but Christian poetry, mosaics, and architecture as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul S. Minear in his thorough study, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, lists and discusses over ninety New Testament images for the Christian community; the church as mother is not among them. Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975).

<sup>2</sup> *unit.* 6 (CCSL 3:253.149-50): "Habere iam non potest Deum patrem qui ecclesiam non habet matrem" (Trans. author).

Christian writers continued to employ and develop the image of *mater ecclesia* in the medieval and modern periods. During the Middle Ages, various theologians, such as Berengaudus and Serlo of Savigny,<sup>3</sup> associated *mater ecclesia* with Mary to create a *Maria-ecclesia* in which the attributes of both figures are understood to be interchangeable in a quasi-perichoretic relationship.<sup>4</sup> Some Catholic thinkers in the modern era, such as Matthias Joseph Scheeben and Hans Urs von Balthasar, further developed this notion and reversed the patristic understanding of the relationship between Mary and the church by making Mary the mother of the church.<sup>5</sup> Others associated *mater ecclesia* with the teaching function of the Magisterium itself.<sup>6</sup> The image of Mother Church has been so historically pervasive in Christian thought that one modern commentator even avers, “The Church is our mother. We would not be Christians if we did not acknowledge in her this essential characteristic.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Berengaudus, *Exposition on the Seven Visions of the Book of the Apocalypse*, PL 17: 876 D, and Serlo of Savigny, *in nativitate B. M.* (pg. 117 in Tissier’s edition). See also Aelred, *Sermon 2 on the Nativity* (PL 195: 323 AC). The identity and, subsequently, the date of the former is still debated among scholars; for the most recent analysis see, Derk Visser, *Apocalypse as Utopian Expectation (800-1500): The Apocalypse Commentary of Berengaudus of Ferrières and the Relationship between Exegesis, Liturgy, and Iconography* (Leiden: Brill, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> *Perichoresis* (also termed Circuminsession) is a patristic term first articulated by Gregory of Nazianzus and developed by John of Damascus, which was used to explicate the relationship of Trinitarian persons. Based on John 17:21, a perichoretic relationship involves an interpenetration of persons. This notion will be later applied in Mariology, notably by Scheeben, concerning the motherhood of Mary and the church.

<sup>5</sup> Scheeben, who influenced Balthasar, applied the notion of *perichoresis* to the relationship of Mary and the church, because he felt a relationship of analogy did not fully capture the closeness between the two figures; see *Handbuch der Katholischen Dogmatik, Vol. 3* (Freiburg: Herder, 1882), 604ff. In *Mariology*, Scheeben goes so far as to say, “Mary is the spiritual mother of mankind in a manner still more sublime than is the Church,” see M. J. Scheeben, *Mariology, Vol. 2*, trans. T. L. M. J. Geukers (St. Louis: Herder, 1947), 250.

<sup>6</sup> This especially can be seen in the “Profession of Faith” of Vatican I.

<sup>7</sup> Henri de Lubac, *The Motherhood of the Church*, trans. Sergia Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 75.

Despite the centrality of *mater ecclesia* throughout the history of Christian ecclesiology, there are surprisingly few systematic studies analyzing the metaphor. The purpose of this dissertation is to help fill this lacuna in scholarship by examining the use and development of *mater ecclesia* among North African writers during the patristic era. The rationale for focusing on its expression in patristic North Africa is threefold. First, modern, especially magisterial, references to Mother Church almost always cite patristic antecedents, Cyprian and Augustine being the most commonly quoted. Second, not only did the explicit title of *mater ecclesia* originate in North Africa, but its writers also employed and developed the metaphor of *mater ecclesia* the most during the early church period. Third, because western ecclesiology has been largely based on the thought of Cyprian and Augustine, understanding their use of *mater ecclesia* can provide a helpful foundation for analyzing more recent expressions of the metaphor.

Concerning the expression of *mater ecclesia* in North African ecclesiology, this dissertation will demonstrate that the metaphor was an expressive reflection of the ecclesiology to which it refers. In the case of North Africa, as the understanding of the church became more abstract, the concept of *mater ecclesia* concomitantly became less reflective of the local Christian community and was personified independently from it. What remained constant, however, was how the metaphor functioned, namely as an image used to delineate who constituted the true church vis-à-vis those who were not included. As will be demonstrated, this is evinced by the fact that the metaphor first arose and was primarily utilized in polemical and persecutory contexts. The image of *mater ecclesia* often had a divisive element to it, as with most rhetoric derived in these contexts. Thus, the meaning and function of the appellation *mater ecclesia*, as developed in North

African ecclesiology, was not conciliatory and inclusive, but rather polemical and exclusive.

### **Mater Ecclesia in Modern Scholarship**

Only since the mid-twentieth century have scholars begun to study the patristic use and development of *mater ecclesia*. Even still, few studies have analyzed the metaphor in a systematic fashion. This is somewhat surprising given not only the popularity of *mater ecclesia* in early Christian thought but also the increased scholarly interest in gendered expressions and images used during the patristic era.<sup>8</sup> The following historiographical survey functions to highlight past contributions in this area and indicate in what way this study diverges from them.

The famous Dutch theologian Sebastian Tromp produced the first significant study highlighting the importance of *mater ecclesia* in patristic thought. In his article,

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<sup>8</sup> Most studies looking at gender during the patristic period focus either on the theological anthropology in patristic theory and practice or on the development of Mariology. Concerning the former see especially, Kari Elisabeth Børresen, "In Defense of Augustine: How *Femina* is *Homo*?" in *Collectanea Augustiniana: Mélanges T.J. van Bavel*, ed. Bernard Bruning; "Male-female, a Critique of Traditional Christian Theology," *Temenos* 13 (1977): 31-42; "Patristic Feminism: The Case of Augustine," *AugStud* 25 (1994): 139-152, and "Gender and Exegesis in the Latin Fathers," *Augustinianum* 40, no. 1 (2000): 65-76; Elizabeth Clark, *Women in the Early Church* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1983); "'Adam's Only Companion': Augustine and the Early Christian Debate on Marriage," *Recherches augustiniennes* 21 (1986): 139-162; "Theory and Practice in Late Ancient Asceticism: Jerome, Chrysostom, and Augustine," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5 (1989): 25-46; Kim Power, *Veiled Desire: Augustine on Women* (New York: Continuum, 1996); Margaret Miles, *Carnal Knowing: Female Nakedness and Religious Meaning in the Christian West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989) and *Desire and Delight: A New Reading of Augustine's "Confessions"* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Women and Redemption: A Theological History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); Catherine Mowry LaCugna's "God in Communion with Us: The Trinity," in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993); G. Bonner, "Augustine's Attitude to Women and <Amicitia>," in *Homo Spiritualis: Festgabe für Luc Verheijen OSA zu seinem 70. Geburtstag*, ed. C Mayer (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1987): 259-75; E. Ann Matter, "Christ, God and Woman in the Thought of St. Augustine," in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner*, eds. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (New York: Routledge, 2000): 164-175. Concerning the latter, see G. Bonner, "The Figure of Eve in Augustine's Theology," *SP* 33 (1997): 22-34; Robert B. Eno, "Mary and Her Role in Patristic Theology," in *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary*, ed. H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, and Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 159-76; Maureen A. Tilley, "Mary in Roman Africa: Evidence for her Cultus," *SP* 39 (2006): 121-126.

“Ecclesia Sponsa Virgo Mater” (1937), Tromp examines the image of *mater ecclesia* among other feminine portrayals of the church and delineates four principal images associated with maternal metaphor: conception, birth, nourishment, and abortion. While Tromp constructs helpful categories for ordering the various uses of *mater ecclesia*, his analysis fundamentally ignores the nuanced portrayals among patristic writers and the varied contexts within which the metaphor was constructed.<sup>9</sup>

Shortly after Tromp’s article, Joseph C. Plumpe undertook a more systematic analysis and produced two related studies that have served as the foundation for all subsequent studies on *mater ecclesia*. In his pilot article, “*Ecclesia Mater*” (1939), Plumpe examines the use of *mater ecclesia* in Latin Christianity, particularly in the works of Tertullian and Cyprian, and demonstrates that they most often utilized the image in pastoral and polemical settings.<sup>10</sup> Plumpe, however, convincingly argues that, even though the explicit appellation of *mater ecclesia* originated in North Africa, Tertullian and Cyprian inherited the tradition of conceptualizing the church as a mother. Plumpe especially depicts Cyprian as having little influence on the development of *mater ecclesia*.<sup>11</sup>

Plumpe’s monograph, *Mater Ecclesia: An Inquiry into the Concept of the Church as Mother in Early Christianity* (1943), builds on his previous work by attempting to

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<sup>9</sup> S. Tromp, “Ecclesia Sponsa Virgo Mater,” *Gregorianum* 28 (1937): 3-29. These themes will again be addressed in Tromp’s voluminous work, *Corpus Christi, quod est Ecclesia* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1946), as part of his attempt to construct a stronger Marian ecclesiology. See also J. Lebreton, “Mater Ecclesia,” *RSR* 2 (1911): 572-3 and P. Lobstein, “Quelques aspects de la notion de l’Église. II. La maternité de l’Église,” *RHPR* 1 (1921): 61-76.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph C. Plumpe, “Ecclesia Mater,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 70 (1939): 535-55.

<sup>11</sup> On this matter, Plumpe states, “It can scarcely be said that any pronounced development of the idea of the Church’s motherhood is in evidence in Cyprian” (Plumpe, “Ecclesia Mater,” 549).

trace the origins of portraying the church as a mother.<sup>12</sup> Plumpe originally speculated a Roman origin for the maternal image in “Ecclesia Mater.” However, after ruling out contemporaneous maternal figures in both Gnosticism and Roman mother cults as possible antecedents, Plumpe settles on Asia Minor, specifically Phrygia, as its originating location, believing it was brought to the West via the communities that eventually settled in Lyons and Vienne.<sup>13</sup> In addition to expanding his analyses of Tertullian and Cyprian, Plumpe also compares their uses of *mater ecclesia* to those of their eastern contemporaries (Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Methodius). Through this approach, Plumpe arrives at different categories than Tromp for characterizing *mater ecclesia* in early patristic writings. For Plumpe, two sensibilities existed in the early church: a western one, which was more pastoral and portrayed *mater ecclesia* in terrestrial terms, and an eastern one, which was more speculative and portrayed *mater ecclesia* in heavenly terms. Although Plumpe oversimplifies these distinctions and does not go beyond the early fourth century, his work on *mater ecclesia* remains the most comprehensive to date.<sup>14</sup>

Renewed interest concerning *mater ecclesia* began around the time of the Second Vatican Council when *ressourcement* historians and theologians were reinterpreting

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<sup>12</sup> Joseph C. Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia: An Inquiry into the Concept of the Church as Mother in Early Christianity* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1943).

<sup>13</sup> Plumpe asserts this given the flourishing of the *Magna Mater* cult in this region, along with Paul’s reference in Galatians 4:26 to the heavenly Jerusalem as the “mother of us all.” Plumpe further speculates that it was most likely the bishop Ponthius who brought the notion of the church as mother to the West “as part of her [the church’s] dowry” (*Mater Ecclesia*, 40).

<sup>14</sup> Some scholars, however, maintain Plumpe’s overall distinction between the eastern and western portrayals of *mater ecclesia* (Delahaye, *Ecclesia Mater*, 115-21) and his position that Origen did not attach much importance to the image (E. Dassman, “Ecclesia vel anima. Die Kirche und ihre Glieder in der Hohelied-Erklärung bei Hippolyt, Origenes und Ambrosius von Mailand,” *Römische Quartalschrift* 61 (1966): 121-44).

patristic theology, especially Origen, in a modern context.<sup>15</sup> Karl Delahaye, for instance, argues in his work, *Ecclesia Mater chez les pères des trois premiers siècles* (1964), that Origen's use of *mater ecclesia* stands as the pinnacle of patristic portrayals.<sup>16</sup> Although Delahaye largely mirrors Plumpe's study and overly dichotomizes the differences between what he terms the "Latin tendency" and the "Greek tendency," his overall approach and focus were well received and stimulated further study among *ressourcement* theologians, notably Henri de Lubac.<sup>17</sup> Lubac, in *Motherhood of the Church* (1971), attempts to demonstrate the maternity of the church as an indispensable characteristic that reinforces the interpersonal community of the church and safeguards it against the modern tendency for creating artificial dichotomies between the clergy and laity.<sup>18</sup> In his sweeping analysis of the patristic use of *mater ecclesia*, Lubac argues that the image of mother in Hellenism and paganism was appropriately transposed into a

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<sup>15</sup> Aside from the above generalization, this diverse movement within Catholicism is difficult to define, and its existence is even dismissed by some of its major representatives, such as Henri de Lubac. It is more properly understood as a theological sensibility than as a school of thought like Thomism. See Jürgen Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie – New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010) and Joseph Carola, "Pre-conciliar Patristic Revival," *AugStud* 38, no. 2 (2007): 381-405.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Delahaye, *Ecclesia Mater chez les pères des trois premiers siècles* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1964), 120. See also his earlier work *Erneuerung der Seelsorgsformen aus der Sicht der frühen Patristik* (Freiburg: Herder, 1958), which informs his later work and lays out his theological agenda.

<sup>17</sup> There are some nuanced differences in Delahaye's work that should be noted. First, Delahaye understands the western/Latin tendency to be more concerned with exteriority (i.e., discipline) and an individual's post-baptismal relationship with the church, and the Greek tendency to be more concerned with interiority (i.e., spiritual progression) and the effects of baptism itself on an individual (*Ecclesia Mater*, 99). Second, Delahaye focuses more on Clement of Alexandria's use of *mater ecclesia* and further demonstrates Plumpe's observation that the metaphor is conspicuously absent from apologetic writings.

<sup>18</sup> The entire work was an expanded compilation of three previous studies conducted in 1971: an article ("Les églises particulières dans l'Église universelle"), a conference paper ("La maternité de l'Église"), and a published interview ("d'une interview recueillie par G. Jarczyk"). The English edition used in this study was published in 1982: *The Motherhood of the Church*, trans. Sergia Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982).

Christian climate to express the unity between Word and sacrament. Like Delahaye, Lubac perceives Origen as the height of such expression.<sup>19</sup>

Hans Urs von Balthasar, in *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church* (1974), is also dependent on Delahaye's historical analysis of *mater ecclesia*, and, like Lubac, seeks to revitalize the metaphor in modern ecclesial discourse by demonstrating its centrality in patristic thought.<sup>20</sup> While Balthasar rightly perceives Mother Church as an evolving image directly reflecting ecclesiological change, his overall notion of a progressively unfolding Catholic ecclesiology skews his understanding with regard to the origin and development of Mother Church. According to Balthasar, patristic writers unreflectively hypostasized the church as a pre-existent mother, along the same lines of a Gnostic aeon, due to their emphasis on an eschatological, pure church.<sup>21</sup> Plumpe earlier demonstrated, however, that there is so little similarity between the characteristics of *mater ecclesia* and the "mother" aeons in Gnosticism that a direct connection between the two cannot be established. Moreover, there is no evidence, at least in the West, that patristic thinkers perceived the church as a hypostasized entity; as will be demonstrated

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<sup>19</sup> Lubac, *Motherhood of the Church*, 47-74, esp. 62-5.

<sup>20</sup> Originally entitled *Der antirömische Affekt*, the first English-version of this study was published in 1986. The second edition used in this study is *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, trans. Andrée Emery (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 195-242. An earlier, less-developed form of this study can be seen in *Explorations in Theology II: Spouse of the Word*, trans. A.V. Littledale, Alexander Dru, Brian McNeil, John Saward, and Edward T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 143-91; originally published in 1961, this work predates Delahaye's, which significantly influenced Balthasar.

<sup>21</sup> Balthasar, *Office of Peter*, 217. Balthasar argues that only through the historical unfolding of a *Maria-ecclesia*, culminating in Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium*, was the remaining vestige of a pseudo-Gnostic ecclesiology conquered. Such a reading of the patristic sources conforms to his overarching goal of establishing the necessity of Mary and Peter as *Realsymbols* for the church, as well as further demonstrates the profound influence that Scheeben's theory on the *perichoretic* relationship between Mary and the church had on Balthasar's thought.



in this dissertation, the church was always grounded in some identifiable group of individuals.

Recent studies on *mater ecclesia* have been less comprehensive and more concentrated on discerning how individual patristic thinkers employed the metaphor in conjunction with other ecclesial images. Some of them have challenged conclusions from prior analyses, most notably Plumpe's. David Rankin, for instance, briefly analyzes Tertullian's use of *mater ecclesia* in his work *Tertullian and the Church* (1995).<sup>22</sup> Contrary to Plumpe's characterization of western portrayals of *mater ecclesia*, Rankin argues that Tertullian's pairing of the church as mother with God as Father suggests a high ecclesiological shift taking place in North African theology. Likewise, F. Ledegang, in *Mysterium Ecclesiae: Images of the Church and Its Members in Origen* (2001),<sup>23</sup> disputes Plumpe and Delahaye's readings of Origen as overly simplistic and demonstrates that Origen used the image of mother to characterize both the heavenly and earthly church, albeit in a slightly different way than Irenaeus or Cyprian.

Other recent studies have examined the use of *mater ecclesia* in patristic writers that earlier surveys neglected or only nominally treated. Robert Murray, for instance, looks at how Syriac writers, specifically Aphrahat and Ephrem, symbolized the church as a mother and theorizes why they utilized the metaphor much later than patristic writers from other areas.<sup>24</sup> More pertinent to this dissertation are those studies focusing on

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<sup>22</sup> David Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> F. Ledegang, *Mysterium Ecclesiae: Images of the Church and Its Members in Origen* (Leuven: Peeters, 2001), 203-17. Ledegang also demonstrates that all four maternal aspects, which Tromp identifies with the image of *mater ecclesia*, are present in Origen's works.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Murray, *Symbols of Church and Kingdom: A Study in Early Syriac Tradition*, rev. ed. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004), 131-58. Murray suggests that the primitive Semitic-Christian tradition of symbolizing the Holy Spirit as a mother slowed the development of portraying the church as

Augustine's articulation of *mater ecclesia*. Carl P. E. Springer, in his article, "The *prosopopoeia* of Church as Mother in Augustine's *Psalmus contra Partem Donati*" (1987), analyzes Augustine's personification of *mater ecclesia* in order to support his overall argument that Augustine's *Psalm against the Donatists* is a more rhetorically sophisticated work than previously considered.<sup>25</sup> Most importantly, Springer demonstrates the centrality of the maternal metaphor in Augustine's thought and his approach to the Donatist polemic.

While Springer limits his investigation to a single work, T. J. van Bavel looks at Augustine's use of *mater ecclesia* more broadly.<sup>26</sup> In "Maternal Aspects in Salvation History according to Augustine" (1997), Bavel holds that Augustine's dominant use of *mater ecclesia* is one that expresses a nutritive aspect of the church, one that lovingly embraces and nourishes its members.<sup>27</sup> Despite the number of sources Bavel draws upon from Augustine's extensive corpus, he predominantly utilizes Augustine's later works and ignores the contextual variations the metaphor exhibits. Both Springer and Bavel's

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one in Syriac Christianity (158). See also Simon Jones, "The Womb and the Spirit in the Baptismal Writings of Ephrem the Syrian," *SL* 33 (2003): 175-93.

<sup>25</sup> Carl P. E. Springer, "The *prosopopoeia* of Church as Mother in Augustine's *Psalmus contra Partem Donati*," *AugStud* 18 (1987): 52-65.

<sup>26</sup> T. J. van Bavel, "Maternal Aspects in Salvation History according to Augustine," *Augustiniana* 47, no. 3-4 (1997): 251-90, esp. 273-278. Other notable studies dealing with Augustine's use of *mater ecclesia* include B. Bruning, "Ab utero matris meae, quae multum speravit in te: la maternité et la paternité d'Augustin," *Augustiniana* 54 (2004): 379-400; E. Lamirande, *L'Eglise céleste selon saint Augustin* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1963); A. Müller, *Ecclesia-Maria: Die Einheit Marias und der Kirche* (Freiburg, 1955), 179-204. R. Palmero Ramos, "Ecclesia Mater" en San Agustín. *Teología de la imagen en los escritos antidonatistas* (Madrid, 1970), 131-168, 239-245; H. Rahner, *Symbole der Kirche; die Ekklesiologie der Väter* (Salzburg: Müller, 1964); J. Ratzinger, *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustins Lehre von der Kirche* (München: K. Zink, 1954), 23-8, 84-89; P. Rinetti, Sant' Agostino e l' "Ecclesia Mater," in *Augustinus Magister II* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1954), 827-34; Albert C. de Veer, "Mater Ecclesia" *Bibliothèque augustinienne* 11 (1949), 548-549.

<sup>27</sup> Bavel maintains this conclusion in his encyclopedic entry "Church," in *ATAE*, 169-76.

studies, while informative, have major limitations and demonstrate the need for a more comprehensive analysis concerning Augustine's use of *mater ecclesia*.

Perhaps the most significant contemporary study dealing with the topic of *mater ecclesia* is Robin M. Jensen's "*Mater Ecclesia and Fons Aeterna: The Church and her Womb in Ancient Christian Tradition*" (2008).<sup>28</sup> Jensen's approach deviates from previous scholarship in three ways. First, Jensen incorporates a large number of patristic sources from various genres, time periods, and geographic locations. Jensen, given her expertise in North African history, naturally tends to focus on western representations of *mater ecclesia* (i.e., Tertullian, Cyprian, Optatus, Ambrose, Augustine, Paulinus of Nola, and Zeno of Verona), but she also includes the maternal portrayals made by Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia.<sup>29</sup> Although the breadth of Jensen's focus precludes an in-depth analysis of any one author, she is the first to cover such a wide range of writings.

Second, Jensen concentrates on the liturgical representations of *mater ecclesia*.<sup>30</sup> In doing so, Jensen concludes, along the same lines as Tromp, that the imagery of

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<sup>28</sup> Robin M. Jensen, "*Mater Ecclesia and Fons Aeterna*," in *A Feminist Companion to Patristic Literature*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Maria Mayo Robbins (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 137-53. These themes and material remains are also mentioned in less detail in other works by Jensen: "Baptismal Rites and Architecture," in *Late Ancient Christianity*, ed. Virginia Burrus (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 117-44, and "Church Buildings in Roman Africa" in *The Practice of Christianity in Roman Africa* by J. Patout Burns and Robin M. Jensen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

<sup>29</sup> The only other study that I am aware of to address Theodore of Mopsuestia's use of *mater ecclesia* is Gerard Kelly, "Baptism – Sacrament of the Birth of the Church," in *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church III: Liturgy and Life*, ed. Bronwen Neil, Geoffrey D. Dunn, and Lawrence Cross (Sydney: St. Paul's Publications, 2003), 159-66.

<sup>30</sup> Marie Farrell looks at a similar theme but less systematically than Jensen in "Of Water and Spirit: An Ecclesial Spirituality," in *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church III: Liturgy and Life*, ed. Bronwen Neil, Geoffrey D. Dunn, and Lawrence Cross (Sydney: St. Paul's Publications, 2003), 167-75.

conception and birth were the common, universal motifs associated with *mater ecclesia*.<sup>31</sup> While this evaluation can only be applied in a liturgical context, Jensen's work, nevertheless, highlights the importance of examining catechetical works in discerning how the metaphor was pastorally presented and commonly experienced in the early church. Third, Jensen adds material representations of *mater ecclesia* and other maternal imagery in her analysis. Although Plumpe included the famous Tabarka mosaic in his 1943 study, Jensen discusses the womb-shaped fonts recently discovered in Sbeitla as well.<sup>32</sup> Her discussion of these images further demonstrates the centrality of *mater ecclesia* in the liturgical life of North Africans and the rich ways that they displayed it.

This dissertation will contribute to the current body of scholarship in three ways. First, the approach taken in this study focuses primarily on the ecclesial context within which *mater ecclesia* is employed. Although the trend in scholarship appropriately has been to analyze the use of *mater ecclesia* in its historical context, as Plumpe does, or in its liturgical setting, as Jensen does, many studies either ignore the corresponding ecclesial setting in which the metaphor was expressed or only treat it superficially; Bavel, for instance, only briefly ties Augustine's use of *mater ecclesia* to the polemical controversies, abstracting the metaphor from its context and intended purpose. Consequently, this has resulted in varied and sometimes incompatible conclusions regarding the use of *mater ecclesia* in patristic theology, such as the case between

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<sup>31</sup> Jensen talks less of abortion and nutrition and adds the categories of insemination and gestation as the part of the maternal imagery associated with the church; see "*Mater Ecclesia and Fons Aeterna*," 145. Jensen also concludes that Zeno "represents a zenith in poetic use of the regenerative and nourishing mother figure in his invitations to the baptismal font," where, in *tract. 37*, he calls the recently baptized a new people formed in "the milky liquid of the genital font" (148).

<sup>32</sup> It should be noted that Jensen also discusses at length the baptistery inscription from the basilica of St. John Lantern in Rome.

Plumpe and Ledegang's antipodal readings of Origen. Because the use of *mater ecclesia* is perceived, in this dissertation, to be an expressive reflection of ecclesiology, the metaphor is understood to be inherently variable, as Balthasar does, and continuously evolving coetaneous with whatever understanding of the church is being articulated. As such, the present study provides a systematic detailing of each individual's ecclesiology in conjunction with the use of *mater ecclesia*, which has not yet been performed.

Second, this dissertation canvases *all* uses of *mater ecclesia* in North African ecclesiology. Most studies have observed its expression in only one or two authors. For instance, while Plumpe and Delahaye analyze the metaphor in the writings of Tertullian and Cyprian, they largely ignore later writers, such as Augustine and Quodvultdeus, and as a consequence, mistakenly assume that the metaphor and its use remained static throughout the rest of North African history; Plumpe, in particular, believes that the metaphor developed very little after Tertullian. This study not only revisits the use of *mater ecclesia* in these authors but also in authors previously ignored: Quodvultdeus and Fulgentius. Such an approach allows a more accurate evaluation of what aspects of the metaphor evolved and what remained constant, as well as advances scholarship concerning the history of North African ecclesiology.

### **Outline of Chapters**

The chapters in this dissertation are ordered chronologically, beginning with the first association of the church as mother in North Africa and ending with its last extant use there. This is done in order to demonstrate both the historical development of the maternal metaphor as well as the continuity of general themes within North Africa.

Within each chapter, each thinker, or group of thinkers, will be situated in their specific context and their ecclesiology described. Since North Africans largely developed and explicated their ecclesiology in the midst of persecutory and theological crises, each theologian's ecclesiology will be presented in light of his particular polemical engagements. After their respective ecclesiologies are established, the manner in which they represent *mater ecclesia* and the way the maternal metaphor reflects their notion of the church will be taken up.

Chapter Two examines the patristic origins of portraying the church as a mother through the first explicit use of the appellation *mater ecclesia*. This chapter looks at the ecclesiology of Irenaeus and the experience of the community at Lyons where the maternal portrayal first appears in the extant patristic literature. It then discusses how Tertullian further developed this imagery, associating the fatherhood of God with the motherhood of the church and giving the church its title of *mater ecclesia*. As will be demonstrated, Irenaeus and Tertullian predominantly used the concept of the church as a mother in the context of persecution in order to delineate ecclesial membership. The remainder of the dissertation will show that this continued to be the particular circumstance for the expression of *mater ecclesia* and the dominant use of the metaphor in North Africa.

Chapter Three principally analyzes Cyprian's ecclesiology and use of *mater ecclesia*; other third-century patristic uses are also mentioned. The chapter demonstrates that Cyprian relied on the maternal metaphor throughout his entire career and frequently employed it in the various internal and external polemics that he dealt with as bishop of Carthage. Prior analyses are challenged, especially Plumpe's, by demonstrating that

neither Cyprian's ecclesiology nor his portrayal of *mater ecclesia* remained static throughout his writings; rather, it will be argued, as Cyprian's ecclesiology developed from a local understanding to a more abstract, universal one located primarily in the college of bishops, so too did his portrayal of *mater ecclesia*.

Chapter Four focuses on the continued use of *mater ecclesia* in fourth- and early fifth-century North African ecclesiology. Although there is mention of its use among Donatists and other Catholic thinkers, such as Optatus of Milevis, this chapter concentrates most centrally on Augustine's use of the metaphor; this is done not only because of Augustine's impact on later western theology but also because he employs the metaphor more than any other writer in almost every situation and context. It will be demonstrated that Augustine typically maintained the traditional connotation of exclusivity when representing the church as mother, yet also developed the metaphor more than any preceding North African writer, especially with regard to Mary and scriptural exegesis. As in Chapter Three, it will also be argued here that Augustine's portrayal of *mater ecclesia* was not static but continuously evolved to fit his polemical and ecclesiological concerns. Attention will be given also to the extant physical representations of the church's maternity that originated at the time to demonstrate further the centrality of the metaphor in North African religious life.

Chapter Five looks at *mater ecclesia* in the writings of Quodvultdeus and Fulgentius of Ruspe, both of whom experienced persecution and the loss of a state-supported church under Vandal occupation in North Africa. Again, it will be demonstrated that the image of *mater ecclesia* was tied to an oppositional ecclesiology that sought to define the exclusive boundaries of the church, a core aspect of North

African ecclesiology. It will be argued that, while neither writer was as creative as Augustine, they still nuanced aspects of the metaphor. This was especially the case with Quodvultdeus, who associated *mater ecclesia* with his apocalyptic ecclesiology.

Chapter Six provides a concluding overview concerning the developmental trends of *mater ecclesia* and North African ecclesiology. It will be maintained that, despite the varied uses of the maternal metaphor among North African writers, the primary function and understanding of the image was polemical and exclusivist. A postscript follows this discussion concerning the implications of this study for modern Catholic ecclesiology on this particular issue. More specifically, it will address the declining use of Mother Church in Catholic ecclesial discourse and suggest that the historical use of the image does not work adequately in a post-Vatican II context.

### **A Note on Style, Translations, and References**

This dissertation is principally concerned with shifting notions of ecclesiology, and as such will frequently use the word church. Church, as will be seen in this limited study, is a multivalent term referring to a wide variety of ecclesial understandings that are always contextually dependent. The amorphous nature of the term has led to an inconsistency when referencing the church with regard to whether or not the term should be capitalized, especially when used in reference to a universal church. To avoid confusion and possibly insult, this dissertation conforms to the sixteenth edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style* and capitalizes the word church when referring to a particular group (i.e., Catholic Church) or to a particular title (i.e., Mother Church), but when referring to an abstract notion of church, such as the universal church or the Body of



Christ, capitalization is not utilized. Such distinctions are made adjectivally. An author or translator's preference is maintained in instances of quotation.

For those ancient sources quoted, whether the text is translated by the author or someone else, the Greek and Latin are provided in the footnotes. The abbreviated references have the following form: standard reference to the work, abbreviated series name, edition, page, and line. For example, when quoting from Tertullian's *On Baptism* (20.5) in the *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, the footnoted reference begins *Bapt.* 20.5 (CCSL 1:295.28-30); and is followed by the Latin text. After the text, the translator is referenced. When someone else's English translation of a text is used, this is indicated this by "Trans.," followed by the translator's last name, series or title, and page number. When an ancient work within the text is referenced, the common English name is provided; however, when parenthetically referenced or footnoted, the standard abbreviations found in the third edition of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* or the encyclopedia *Augustine through the Ages* are used.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ORIGINS OF *MATER ECCLESIA*: IRENAEUS AND TERTULLIAN

*Mater ecclesia*, as an explicit title for the church, does not appear in patristic literature until the early third century. Before this time, references to the maternity of the church are relatively few in extant writings. There are none in the works of Ignatius of Antioch or in the apologetic authors, such as Justin Martyr. When the apostolic writers applied maternal imagery, it was for elucidating and personifying the concept of faith. For instance, Polycarp, in his *Letter to the Philipppians* (ca. 110), refers to faith (*pistis*) as the mother of all Christians.<sup>1</sup> Likewise, in the *Acts of Justin and His Companions* (ca. 165), when the prefect Rusticus asks the confessor Hierax where his parents are, Hierax replies that Christ is his father and his faith in Christ as his mother.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the apostolic church seems to have preferred a *mater pistis* to a *mater ecclesia*.<sup>3</sup>

Starting in the late second century, however, patristic writers began to attach maternal imagery to their understanding of the church. The appearance of maternal imagery, while indirectly connected to particular biblical precedents, was seemingly spontaneous. Once the church became associated with motherhood, it quickly became a regularly used ecclesial metaphor, and within twenty-five years of this association, the

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<sup>1</sup> 3. 2.

<sup>2</sup> B, 4. See Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 51. Only Recension B, the most well-known but later version of the text, contains this characterization of the church. It is not clear how long after Recension A the text was composed or which is more accurate, since Recension B is the oldest extant manuscript; see F. C. Burkitt "The Oldest Manuscript of St. Justin's Martyrdom," *JTS* 11 (1909): 61-6.

<sup>3</sup> Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia*, 18-21.

appellation *mater ecclesia* developed. The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, I will analyze the maternal imagery found in the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon* and the works of Irenaeus. Although these works fall beyond the geographical scope of this study, they are the first patristic instances of imaging the church as a mother and influence later expressions of *mater ecclesia*. Second, I will examine Tertullian's ecclesiology and use of maternal imagery. Tertullian was not only the first North African writer to rely on the maternal metaphor for explicating his concept of church, but he was also the first Christian writer to designate the title of *mater ecclesia* to the church. It will be demonstrated in the writings of Irenaeus and Tertullian that the concept of *mater ecclesia* originated and developed within a context of ecclesial conflict, and as a result functioned primarily as a symbol of exclusive group identity.

### **Irenaeus and the Church in Lyon**

Irenaeus's legacy to the development of Christian theology is immense. Often credited with being the first systematic theologian in the West, some scholars go so far as to locate "the birth of Christian theology" with Irenaeus.<sup>4</sup> Subsequent patristic writers appropriated many of the themes and images first used by him. This was certainly the case among North Africa writers: both Tertullian and Augustine utilized Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* in their works.<sup>5</sup> Irenaeus not only significantly advanced notions of scriptural and doctrinal orthodoxy, but he was also, as Roch Kereszty remarks, "the first

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance Quasten, *Patrology 1*, 294 and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics (II: Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Style)*, trans. Andrew Louth, Francis McDonagh, and Brian McNeil (New York: Ignatius Press, 1984), 31-2.

<sup>5</sup> Tert., *Adu. Valent.* 5; Aug., *c. Jul.* 1.3.5.

Church Father who achieve[d] an ecclesiological synthesis.”<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that Irenaeus consciously formed an ecclesiology in the modern sense of the term; his overt goal was to demonstrate against his Gnostic opponents the singularity of God’s nature and recapitulatory plan for human redemption. However, Irenaeus did articulate a thorough understanding of the church as an integral part of this unity and purpose.

In addition, the earliest and most florid maternal imagery associated with the church comes from Irenaeus and the Christian community at Lyon. In both the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon* and the extant works of Irenaeus (*Against Heresies and Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*), the church is figuratively conveyed to be a mother, one who nurtures and guarantees the salvation of her children. Although the appellation *mater ecclesia* is never used in any of these late second-century works, the particular themes associated with the maternity of the church formed the basis for how the church was to be understood as a mother by succeeding patristic writers. While the significance of the Lyon church in the development of *mater ecclesia* has been noted in prior scholarship,<sup>7</sup> the present investigation by rooting the metaphor in its ecclesiological context will argue more firmly that the community, especially through Irenaeus, was responsible for the eventual formulation of *mater ecclesia* in western Christianity.

## **1. The Church of Lyon in the Late Second Century**

Little is known concerning the origins of the southern Gallic church of Lyon. Given the names of various confessors, it seems that a large portion of the community’s

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<sup>6</sup> Roch A. Kereszty, “The Unity of the Church in the Theology of Irenaeus,” *Second Century* 4, no. 4 (1984): 217.

<sup>7</sup> Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia*, 36-44 and Delahaye, *Ecclesia Mater*, 81-9.

members was from Asia Minor.<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus, who was a presbyter of the Lyon community until he became a bishop in 177, was from Smyrna where he had studied under Polycarp.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the community seems to have retained close ties to the communities in Asia Minor. The community wrote a letter to Asia Minor detailing its own persecution in Lyon as well as sending its support over the rise of the New Prophecy in Asia Minor. What is clear, however, is that very soon after the community was founded in Lyon, a violent persecution broke out.<sup>10</sup> While the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon* does not provide an explicit reason for the public outcry leading to the persecution of Christians,<sup>11</sup> the recent arrival of the Christian community in Lyon coupled with its refusal to

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<sup>8</sup> There is some scholarly disagreement as to whether or not the community was of an Asiatic origin (see W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus*, repr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 2-5. vs. H. Leclercq, "Lyon," *DACL* 10.1.74). While the evidence is sufficient I believe to suggest Asiatic roots, I am less persuaded that the Christian community's former identity coupled with its upward mobility was a primary cause for their persecution in 177 as Frend suggests (*Martyrdom*, 4-5). The *taurobolium* was being performed *pro salute* in Lyons at this time (CIL xiii, 1751-5), which would suggest an indifference to foreign cultic practices.

<sup>9</sup> *HE* 5.20.4 and *AH* 3.3.4. P. Nautin holds a minority view arguing that Irenaeus was already a bishop by this point in Vienne, see *Lettres et écrivains chrétiens des IIe et IIIe siècles* (Paris: Cerf, 1961), 93-5.

<sup>10</sup> *HE* 5.1.3-2.7. While Sulpicius Severus indicates that the persecution occurred shortly after the church's establishment (*Chronicon*, 2.32), the document's relatively late date does not lend credibility to its historicity of the persecution in 177. However, the evidence, or lack-there-of, suggests that the community was quite recent as there is no indication that the community was well-founded prior to the persecution and the only known bishop to precede Irenaeus is Pothinus.

<sup>11</sup> Following G. E. M. Ste. Croix's approach, the reasons as to why the Roman government persecuted and the reason why the people demanded it must be distinguished from one another. According to Ste. Croix, the general populace perceived Christianity, as being godless or a *superstitio prava*, and charged them as such. The governors, exercising *cognitio extraordinaria*, maintained order in their province by punishing Christians for simply being Christian. See G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted?" *Past and Present* 26 (1963): 6-38; "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted? A Rejoinder," *Past and Present* 27 (1964): 28-33. A. N. Sherwin-White, however, believes that the main reason Christians were charged was because they were associated with acts of *flagitia*, and they were legally punished as their actions were equated with *contumacia*; he argues against Ste. Croix that only later was the charge of *superstitio* applied. See A. N. Sherwin-White, "The Early Persecutions and Roman Law Again," *Journal of Theological Studies* 3 (1952): 199-213; "Why Were the Early Christians Persecuted? An Amendment," *Past and Present* 27 (1964): 23-27; *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament: The Sarum Lectures: 1960-1* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963). In the case of Lyon, once Christians were charged and the governor ordered a search for Christians, their pagan slaves accused them of crimes akin to *flagitia* (*HE* 5.1.14), but there is no indication that those were the rumors that functioned as the precipitant for the public outcry against the Christians.

acknowledge the local gods may have been enough to cause alarm among the Gallic people and to stimulate the coercive actions taken against them.<sup>12</sup> According to the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon*, Christians were first banned from public activities and eventually all public places.<sup>13</sup> Stimulated by mob action, the persecution in Lyon was violent and despite earlier imperial instructions not to hunt out Christians or charge them without formal accusation, the governor ordered that all of the Christians of Lyon and Vienne were to be examined.<sup>14</sup>

By the time the persecution ended, there were forty-eight Christian martyrs as well as various confessors.<sup>15</sup> Irenaeus was not among those who were martyred, possibly because he was not present in Gaul during the height of the persecution. At some point prior to their execution, the confessors of Lyon wrote various epistolary appeals to Pope Eleutherius addressing their concerns surrounding the rise of the New Prophecy in Asia Minor, and they chose Irenaeus to deliver the letter. Frend suggests that this occurred during the time when the governor was waiting for a response from Marcus Aurelius

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<sup>12</sup> W. H. C. Frend further entertains the possibility that the passing of a recent *Senatus Consultum* in 176 may have provided a strong economic motivation for singling out the Christians because it allowed wealthy landowners to purchase criminals instead of more expensive gladiators for the games. Frend (*Martyrdom*, 5) bases this conjecture on the study of J. H. Oliver and R. E. A. Palmer, "Minutes of an Act of the Roman Senate," *Hesperia* 24 (1955): 320-49. While Frend does acknowledge that their theory is circumstantial and raises the concern that no Christian author ever cites this *senatus consultum* as a reason for persecution, I would also add that given the frequent attempts by the local authorities to persuade the Christians as well as their reluctance to persecute the Marcosian Gnostics, their impetus for persecution had little to do with economics.

<sup>13</sup> *HE* 5.1.5.

<sup>14</sup> *HE* 5.1.14. Both Trajan (Pliny *Ep.* 10.97) and Hadrian (Justin *Apol.* 1.68 and Eusebius *HE* 4.9) held the same opinion regarding the Christians; however, their advice was not universally followed as was the case not only in Lyon but also in Smyrna (*Mart. Pol.* 9.1ff) and Carthage (*Pass. Perp.* 6.1ff).

<sup>15</sup> See Frend, *Martyrdom*, 2-3.

concerning the execution of the Christian Attalus who was also a Roman citizen.<sup>16</sup> Once Irenaeus returned, he was made bishop of Lyon succeeding the martyred bishop Ponthius.<sup>17</sup> Although Christians in Lyon enjoyed relative peace following the persecution of 177, the severity and recentness of the persecution had a profound impact on the collective identity of the group as well as Irenaeus's theology.<sup>18</sup>

The Christian community at Lyon also had to deal with various internal conflicts. The most substantial of these was a Christianized form of Gnosticism. Gnosticism was an even greater threat to the community in Lyon than the local mobs because it had gained popular appeal and mimicked various Christian rites, such as baptismal and Eucharistic practices.<sup>19</sup> The dominant sect in Lyon was the Marcosians, a variation of Valentinian Gnosticism that adapted Pythagorean number theory to the Gnostic cosmology in order to provide an alternate and mystical systematization of the multiplicity of gods. Most disturbing to Irenaeus was the antinomian tendencies of some of the Marcosians who claimed to have attained the height of perfection and were free to act in whatever manner they wanted, especially as it concerned sexual relations.<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus regarded this group as a sign of the Antichrist and devoted most of his literary energy toward refuting their

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<sup>16</sup> *HE* 5.3.4-4.2. Frend, *Martyrdom*, 8. While Frend's reconstruction is very plausible, it does not explain why Irenaeus was not chosen in the initial roundup of Christians. Either he was in hiding during the initial roundup of Christians or the investigations were not as rigorous as the text suggests.

<sup>17</sup> *HE* 5.5.8.

<sup>18</sup> Irenaeus makes no mention of the persecution in his extant works. The Gallic parishes held meetings in 195 to discuss the Quartodeciman controversy between Victor and Polycrates (*HE* 5.23.2). There are no reports of local backlash, and given the public nature of these discussions, this suggests that the incident in 177 was an isolated occurrence.

<sup>19</sup> *AH* 1.13.2 and 1.21.3-5.

<sup>20</sup> *AH* 1.13.6.

claims.<sup>21</sup> In doing so, Irenaeus articulated a thoroughgoing theology that stressed unity and singularity to combat the sectarian and cosmological multiplicity of Gnosticism.

## 2. Irenaeus's Ecclesiology

Irenaeus found that he and his Gnostic opponents held certain views in common. Both shared the overarching epistemological claim that proper belief was necessary for salvation. Both utilized the same scriptural texts to prove their theologies, but rather than making an argument for Christian exclusivity based upon something shared with his opponents, Irenaeus instead formulates an understanding of the church that is able to undercut his opponents' claims of privileged truth and superior exegesis. Irenaeus argues that the church functions as the exclusive locus of salvation. For Irenaeus, salvation is fundamentally based on possessing the truth that was fully revealed by Jesus, which is presently transmitted by the Holy Spirit. Only the true church, which is spread throughout the world, possesses the Holy Spirit and thus salvific truth.<sup>22</sup>

The church for Irenaeus has a central function in the economy of salvation. He does not portray it as a post-lapsarian afterthought but as a part of the divine creative act, referring to it as the paradisaal garden in the present world.<sup>23</sup> Just as Christ is the new

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<sup>21</sup> *AH* 1.13.1.

<sup>22</sup> *AH* 3.24.1. Terrance L. Tiessen, while ambitiously attempting to discern whether or not Irenaeus's theology is a patristic antecedent to Karl Rahner's notion of "anonymous Christianity," argues that Irenaeus believed that the whole world had been fully evangelized, and thus, all unbelieving humans were culpable for their disbelief and subject to damnation, see *Irenaeus on Salvation of the Unevangelized* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1993), 77-80. I am not fully convinced that this is the case. Irenaeus is not consistent concerning the extent to which the world has been evangelized; in some places he talks of many nations (*AH* 3.4.2), which does not necessarily connote the whole world, whereas elsewhere he will talk of the whole world without qualification (*AH* 5.20.1). It is hard to imagine Irenaeus believed the entire world had been evangelized, and I think it is more probable that his language of universality is attributable to his anti-Gnostic rhetoric.

<sup>23</sup> *AH* 5.20.2.



Adam and recapitulates the original failure, the church functions as the new paradisaical condition with nourishment coming from Scripture.<sup>24</sup> As G. Wingren notes about the relationship of anthropology and ecclesiology in Irenaeus, “Transformation into the likeness of Christ is realised within the Church, the Body of Christ, and is completed only in the resurrection from the dead in the Kingdom of the Son when God becomes all in all. Thus, in the Church the original Creation breaks through afresh and extends towards the resurrection.”<sup>25</sup> The church is a location of nourishment in the divine economy of salvation. Unlike the forbidden fruit eaten by Adam and Eve, the church for Irenaeus provides an individual with true knowledge through its teaching; it is the necessary life-source for salvation.

For Irenaeus, two marks guarantee that a particular church possesses the Holy Spirit and truth necessary for salvation: 1) unity and 2) martyrdom.<sup>26</sup> Against the various understandings of the Christian message, Irenaeus argues that the church is fundamentally unified in a shared tradition of faith.<sup>27</sup> He calls the singularity of transmitted belief the “rule of truth” or the “rule of faith,” the contents of which he repeats in various places.<sup>28</sup> According to Irenaeus, the rule of truth is the same faith transmitted by the apostles and continuously preserved by the true church. Not only does

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<sup>24</sup> *AH* 3.18.7, 3.21.10, 5.21.1-2.

<sup>25</sup> G. Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation: A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), xiv.

<sup>26</sup> Eric Osborn, in *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), delineates five marks of truth according to Irenaeus: 1) the uniqueness of God 2) the uniqueness of truth 3) apostolic succession 4) catholicity 5) the opposite effects of martyrdom and heresy (127ff). It is unclear why Osborn does not refer to these as marks of the church, since the church and truth are synonymous for Irenaeus. Moreover, the first three marks seem to be subsets of the fourth mark, catholicity.

<sup>27</sup> *AH* 5.20.1.

<sup>28</sup> See for instance, *AH* 1.22.1 and *Demonstration* 6.

Irenaeus understand the rule of truth to possess the content of a continued apostolic faith, but he also perceives it as an interpretive map necessary for a proper reading of Scripture. As Mary Ann Donovan states, “He [Irenaeus] understands the Rule of Faith to be in a dialogical relationship with the Scriptures in such a way that each serves to amplify and correct the other.”<sup>29</sup> In doing so, Irenaeus creates an ecclesiology that requires simultaneous assent to both a scriptural and preached tradition where rejection of one necessarily means rejection of the other.<sup>30</sup>

The rule of truth for Irenaeus is demonstrated and preserved through an unbroken line of apostolic succession. Apostolicity functions as a physically perceivable sign of participation in the true church. In particular, Rome and its unbroken line of succeeding bishops, which Irenaeus explicitly details, further symbolize this unity.<sup>31</sup> While Irenaeus does not argue that Rome has juridical supremacy over other churches, he does see Rome as an authoritative symbol with which communion is necessary to guarantee possession of apostolic unity. Irenaeus’s appeal to apostolic unity with its focus on the singularity of preaching and practice that is centered on Rome elevated the notion of church. Despite the multiplicity of local churches, all of them share the same apostolic referent in Rome, which symbolically functions as the repository and protector of a singular truth.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Irenaeus constructs an ecclesiology with a publically clear boundary delineating who has

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<sup>29</sup>Mary Ann Donovan, *One Right Reading? A Guide to Irenaeus* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1997), 3. Donovan asserts that this is circular when understood logically but is dialogical when understood practically (11). John Behr, in *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), retains Irenaeus’s rhetorical language and describes the rule of truth as “the formal expression of the hypothesis of Scripture” (33).

<sup>30</sup> *AH* 3.2.2.

<sup>31</sup> *AH* 3.3.3.

<sup>32</sup> *AH* 1.10.2.

access to truth by their relationship with the episcopacy, something Gnostics were unable to claim.

The community's experience of persecution in 177 greatly impacted Irenaeus's notion of ecclesiology. Like many other early patristic writers, he understands the church to be exemplified in the martyrs who demonstrate their love of God through suffering.<sup>33</sup> In contrast to the Gnostics, who evaded persecution and considered it unnecessary for discipleship, Irenaeus argues the true church continuously suffers for their confession in Christ.<sup>34</sup> As with apostolicity, the willingness to die for Jesus clearly demarcated who was in the true church and who were merely claiming to be.

### 3. Maternal Imagery in Lyon

The first clear connection between the church and motherhood is in the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon*.<sup>35</sup> In it, the image of mother is connected with the activity of the church's confessors. At the end of the letter, the author writes concerning the death of the confessors, "In peace they departed to God, leaving no pain for their Mother, no strife or conflict for their brothers, but rather joy, peace, harmony, and love."<sup>36</sup> Although the full appellation of Mother Church is not used, the mother here is

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<sup>33</sup> AH 4.33.9.

<sup>34</sup> See for instance Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons*, 135-40; Donovan, *One Right Reading*, 163-9; and Constantine N. Tsirpanlis, "The Antichrist and the End of the World in Irenaeus, Justin, Hippolytus, and Tertullian" *The Patristic and Byzantine Review* 9, no. 1 (1990): 7-9 and 11-12.

<sup>35</sup> While some scholars speculate that Irenaeus may have produced this letter (Nautin, *Lettres et écrivains chrétiens*, 54-61), the authorship of this letter cannot ultimately be determined from the extant literature and will be treated distinctly from Irenaeus's work in the present investigation.

<sup>36</sup> HE 5.2.7 (SC 41:25): "μετ' εἰρήνης ἐχώρησαν πρὸς θεόν, μὴ καταλιπόντες πόνον τῇ μητρὶ μηδὲ στάσιν καὶ πόλεμον τοῖς ἀδελφοῖς ἀλλὰ χαρὰν καὶ εἰρήνην καὶ ὁμόνοιαν καὶ ἀγάπην" (Trans. Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 85).

clearly in reference to the church. There are two points to make about this passage. First, as Plumpe previously noticed, there is a certain “familiarity” with which the church is referred to as a mother, one that required no further explanation.<sup>37</sup> Such familiarity suggests that at least in Lyon it was commonplace to attribute motherly qualities to the church. Second, the description of the mother’s wellbeing is tied directly to the actions of her children. This suggests that the church is not perceived as being distinct from its members. Rather than a transcendent pre-existing church that seems to stand above and is unaffected by her children, the mother’s pain is inversely correlated to the pain of her children.<sup>38</sup> The mother is the community itself.

The martyrs, who were perceived as true witnesses to Christ, are also likened to mothers. The humble compassion that the martyrs demonstrated toward the fallen, as well as supplication before the Father, is expressed in terms of a mother’s love.<sup>39</sup> In telling the story of Alexander, the author compares Alexander’s exhortations to other Christians with that of a mother giving birth.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, Blandina, after encouraging her brother Ponticus to endure his torture, is compared to a mother:

Like a noble mother encouraging her children, she sent before her in triumph to the King, and then, after duplicating in her own body all her children’s sufferings, she hastened to rejoin them, rejoicing and glorifying in her death as though she had been invited to a bridal banquet instead of being a victim of the beasts.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia*, 37-8.

<sup>38</sup> This passage may also be a subtle allusion to Revelation 12:2 where the mother is portrayed as being in pain during birth; here the mother is signifying not an upcoming struggle as in Revelation but a moment of victory against those perceived as the devil.

<sup>39</sup> *HE* 5.2.3 and 6.

<sup>40</sup> *HE* 5.1.49.

<sup>41</sup> *HE* 5.1.55 (SC 41:20-21): “καθάπερ μήτηρ εὐγενῆς παρορμήσασα τὰ τέκνα καὶ νικηφόρους προπέμψασα πρὸς τὸν βασιλέα, ἀναμετρομένη καὶ αὐτὴ πάντα τὰ τῶν παίδων ἀγωνίσματα

The allusion to the mother in 2 Maccabees 7:20-3 is apparent; both Blandina and the mother in Maccabees were the last to follow their children in martyrdom. Given the fact that maternal imagery is applied to both the church and martyrs, this would suggest that the martyrs were equated with the church itself and its motherhood, and that 2 Maccabees functioned as the scriptural precedent for understanding the church as a mother; this connection becomes more explicit in later patristic writers, such as Cyprian. This is also an instance where the maternal qualities of the church are coordinated with the maternal activities of its members suggesting there was originally little distinction understood between the community itself as a mother and the “motherly” activities of individual members within that community.

In contrast to the martyrs who receive motherly designations and descriptions, the author of the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon* likens those individuals in the community who failed to confess Christ before the tribunal to stillborn children:<sup>42</sup>

The dead were restored to life through the living; the martyrs brought favor to those who bore no witness, and the virgin Mother experienced much joy in recovering alive those whom she had cast forth stillborn. For through the martyrs those who denied the faith for the most part went through the same process and were conceived and quickened again in the womb and learned to confess Christ.<sup>43</sup>

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ἔσπευδεν πρὸς αὐτούς, χαίρουσα καὶ ἀγαλλιωμένη ἐπὶ τῇ ἐξόδῳ, ὡς εἰς νυμφικὸν δεῖπνον κεκλημένη, ἀλλὰ μὴ πρὸς θηρία βεβλημένη” (Trans. Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 79).

<sup>42</sup> Likewise, Irenaeus understands apostasy, whether in the form of adopting heretical beliefs or failure to confess, to strip a person of their eternal inheritance and render them lifeless due to their separation from God (AH 4.41.3, 5.9.2-4, 5.27.2).

<sup>43</sup> HE 5.1.45-6 (SC 41:18): “διὰ γὰρ τῶν ζώντων ἐζωοποιοῦντο τὰ νεκρά, καὶ μάρτυρες τοῖς μὴ μάρτυσιν ἐχαρίζοντο, καὶ ἐνεγίνετο πολλὴ χαρὰ τῇ παρθένῳ μητρὶ, οὗς ὡς νεκροὺς ἐξέτρωσε, τούτους ζώντας ἀπολαμβανούσῃ. δι’ ἐκείνων γὰρ οἱ πλείους τῶν ἡρνημένων ἀνεμετροῦντο καὶ ἀνεκύϊσκοντο καὶ ἀνεζωοπυροῦντο καὶ ἐμάνθανον ὁμολογεῖν” (Trans. Musurillo, *Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, 77). See also HE 5.1.11 and 63.

Again, the emotional state of the mother is tied to the success and failures of her children. Possibly alluding to 1 Corinthians 15:8 with Paul's language of being stillborn and John 3:1-10 with the image of being reborn,<sup>44</sup> the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon* vividly portrays (re)admission to the church through martyrdom as a rebirth from the womb.<sup>45</sup> Since martyrdom was considered a baptism in blood, this may be the first patristic reference that likens the act of being baptized to a spiritual rebirth from the church's womb.

Irenaeus uses maternal imagery in conjunction with the church somewhat differently than does the author of the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon*. For Irenaeus, the motherhood of the church is tied to its apostolicity. In the preface to his fifth book of *Against Heresies*, he states,

With the truth having been revealed and the preaching of the church clearly shown, which the prophets had publicly made known (which is how we have demonstrated it), Christ however perfected, the apostles accurately handed down, from whom the church (alone throughout the whole world receiving and properly safeguarding them) hands them down to her children.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Concerning the former, *HE* 5.1.45-6 uses the words ἐξέτρωσε (cast forth) and ὡς νεκροῦς (stillborn). 1 Cor 15:8 has the noun ἐκτρώμα, which is cognate of ἐξέτρωσε. Both refer to miscarriages or abortions in association with the faith. However, it is only speculative that the author of the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon* had 1 Cor 15:8 in mind.

<sup>45</sup> This passage is unclear as it could refer to the martyrs' power of intercession for the lapsed, that is, to the martyrdom of others gaining forgiveness for the lapsed members. However, I read this passage as referring to the exemplary power of the martyrs. In other words, the martyrs, through their demonstration of true faith, stimulated others in the community, who previously failed, to take on martyrdom and regain their baptismal promise, and thus, indicates the understanding of a second baptism for previously failed members through the confession of martyrdom.

<sup>46</sup> *AH* 5.pref. (SC 153:10.7-12): "et veritate ostensa, et manifestato praeconio Ecclesiae, quod prophetae quidem praeconaverunt, quemadmodum demonstravimus, perfecit autem Christus, Apostoli vero tradiderunt, a quibus Ecclesia accipiens per universum mundum sola bene custodiens tradit filiis suis" (Trans. author). Cf. *AH* 3.pref. It should be noted that we are dependent on the ancient Latin translation for most of *Against Heresies*, since the complete Greek text is lost (see John J. Dillon, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons Against the Heresies* (New York: Newman Press, 1992), 11-15.

Although the church here is not explicitly called a mother, her motherhood is demonstrated by referring to Christians as sons of the church. What is transmitted to the children is the church's life-giving truth. Irenaeus reiterates this idea in the closing chapters of *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*: "This, beloved, is the preaching of the truth, and this is the character of our salvation, and this is the way of life, which the prophets announced and Christ confirmed and the apostles handed over and the church, in the whole world, hands down to her children."<sup>47</sup> As in *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus understands the motherhood of the church to be giving life to her children through the truths it transmits from the apostles.

The truth received by Christians from the church is considered to be the necessary life-giving nourishment for salvation. In *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus compares this truth to the milk of a mother's breast:

Therefore those, who do not share in him, neither are nourished into life from the breasts of the mother nor do they gain that most brilliant font issuing from the body of Christ, but they dig for themselves worn-out cisterns from the trenches of the earth, and they drink putrid water from the dirt, fleeing the faith of the church lest they be taught and rejecting indeed the Spirit so that they may not be educated.<sup>48</sup>

For Irenaeus, God entrusts vivifying faith to the church where it preserves and transmits this spiritual nourishment. Only those who are children of the church have access to the mother's breasts. While the mother is portrayed in a nutritive sense, her nourishment is

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<sup>47</sup> *Demonstration* 98. Trans. John Behr, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: On the Apostolic Preaching* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 100. For the few passages I use from *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, I chose to use Behr's translation, which is based on the Armenian translation of the text.

<sup>48</sup> *AH* 3.24.1 (SC 211:474.29-35): "Quapropter qui non participant eum, neque a mamillis Matris nutriuntur in uitam neque percipiunt de corpore Christi procedentem nitidissimum fontem, sed effodiunt sibi lacus detritos de fossis terrenis, et de caeno putidam bibunt aquam, effugientes fidem Ecclesiae ne traducantur, reicientes uero Spiritum ut non erudiantur" (Trans. author). See also *AH* 5.20.2.

exclusive to those properly called her children. Alienation from the mother results in alienation from truth, and consequently, salvation. Thus, the mother image functions not as an all-embracing figure but as an exclusive and demarcating figure.

This notion of the church's nutritive function is also related to Irenaeus's overall economy of salvation. Against the charges that God could/should have created a perfect being in order to prevent the fall of Adam and Eve, he argues that humans by virtue of being created cannot have successfully possessed immediate perfection. Perfection for created beings requires growth:

For just as these things are of a later date, it also follows that they are of an infantile state; and just as they are of an infantile state, it also follows that they are unaccustomed to and unexercised in perfect discipline. For just as a mother certainly is able to give real food to her infant, the infant itself, however, is still at this point not able to receive more solid food. Thus also God was certainly able to give perfection to man from the start; however, man was unable to receive it, as he was truly an infant.<sup>49</sup>

Utilizing 1 Corinthians 3:2, Irenaeus argues that God did not purposefully create deficient beings, but that God's creation was as perfect as its own finite existence would allow.

The necessary nutrition, which the church now offers, cannot be given to Adam and Eve in paradise because they were still too infantile. Thus, the church, which Irenaeus understands to be a mother and prefigured in paradise, plays an integral role in the entire history of God's plan for human perfection and is linked not only to his notions of apostolic succession but his anthropology and soteriology as well.

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<sup>49</sup> *AH* 4.38.1 (SC 100:946-948.10-17): "secundum enim quod sunt posteriora, secundum hoc et infantilia, et secundum quod infantilia, secundum hoc et insueta et inexercitata ad perfectam disciplinam. Quemadmodum enim mater potest quidem praestare perfectam escam infanti, ille autem adhuc non potest robustiorem se percipere escam, sic et Deus ipse quidem potens fuit homini | praestare ab initio perfectionem, homo autem impotens percipere illam: infans enim fuit" (Trans. author).



Not only does the church for Irenaeus provide its members with nutrition but also life itself. In the fourth book of *Against Heresies*, he expands on the generative function of the church in his discussion of eschatological prophecies:

And those, who proclaimed him to be Emmanuel [born] of the virgin, they were making evident the joining of the Word of God to his earthly form, because the Word should be flesh and the Son of God should be the Son of Man (the pure one purely opening her pure womb, which regenerates humans in God, which he himself made pure).<sup>50</sup>

Here and elsewhere, the church for Irenaeus functions as the only entrance into life.<sup>51</sup>

Biological generation was by itself seen as entrance into death, whereas the womb of the church, which was purified by Christ, is considered to be the only means to everlasting life.

The origins of Irenaeus's use of the imagery are difficult to ascertain because, like the author of the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon*, he uses the phrase as though it were commonly understood with no explanation. J. Plumpe speculates that Pothinus who had probably come from Asia Minor and established the Lyon community had brought with him the notion of the church's motherhood "as part of her dowry."<sup>52</sup> While it is most likely that the imagery did arise first in Asia Minor, given its early robust usage by the church of Lyon and the predominance of the Great Mother cult in Asia Minor, it cannot be determined who first identified the church as a mother. It could quite as easily have originated with Irenaeus. He may have influenced the writers of *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon*, or as some have speculated, he could have produced the

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<sup>50</sup> AH 4.33.11 (SC 100:830.225-30): "et qui eum ex Virgine Emmanuel praedicabant adunitionem Verbi Dei ad plasma ejus manifestabant; quoniam Verbum caro erit et Filius Dei Filius hominis, purus pure puram aperiens vulvam eam quae regenerat homines in Deum, quam ipse puram fecit" (Trans. author).

<sup>51</sup> AH 3.4.1, 4.33.4, and 5.1.3.

<sup>52</sup> Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia*, 40.

letter himself.<sup>53</sup> All that can be said with certainty is that the community of Lyon, which possessed roots in Asia Minor, understood the church as mother, and they seem to be the first to make such a connection.

Likewise, it is difficult to discern a direct scriptural precedent for portraying the church as a mother. As previously noted, both Irenaeus and the author of the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon* use the phrase with little qualification or explicit biblical reference. In the *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyon*, the author may have had 2 Maccabees 7:20ff, 1 Corinthians 15:8, and John 3:1-10 in mind. However, no explicit exegetical connection was made between the image and the parallel biblical passage. One would have expected Irenaeus to use the mother figure in Revelation, given his experience of persecution, emphasis on martyrdom, and his apocalyptic sensibility. However, there is no real similarity between Irenaeus's references and the image used in Revelation; he never portrays the church as a cosmic figure. The only direct scriptural reference Irenaeus utilizes concerning maternal imagery is Paul's reading of Isaiah 54:1 in Galatians 4:21ff. In *Demonstration of Apostolic Teaching*, he states,

For which reason the Church bears as fruit so great a number of the saved; for it is no longer an intercessor, Moses, nor an angel, Elias, but the Lord Himself who saves us, bestowing a greater number of children on the Church <than> on the <former> Synagogue, as Isaias announced, saying "Rejoice, O barren One, who did not bear,"—and barren is the Church, which in former times did not present any children at all to God.<sup>54</sup>

Irenaeus here identifies the church with Israel and focuses on the transition from barrenness to fruitfulness. This, however, is the only time he mentions the barrenness of

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<sup>53</sup> Nautin, *Lettres et écrivains chrétiens*, 54-61.

<sup>54</sup> 94. Behr, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, 96-7. Interestingly unlike other patristic writers, who understood the Rachel-Church typology through the Pauline notion of barrenness-fecundity, Irenaeus believed the story of Rachel and her sister to represent the begetting of two laws from God (AH 4.21.3).

the church prior to Christ; he always focuses on the church's maternity as it relates to nutrition and apostolic succession. Thus, the maternal imagery in Scripture may have given a precedent for a nascent understanding of the church as a motherly female, but no particular understanding of that image seems to have been used directly by Irenaeus.

Irenaeus's connection between the church and motherhood may have been stimulated by his polemics with the Gnostics. Throughout *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus spends a good deal of time ridiculing the Gnostic understandings of Sophia, the aeon they believed was the mother of the present world (through her creation of the demiurge) and a significant figure in redemption. At the end of book three, he states,

However, we pray that these individuals do not persist in the pit, which they themselves dug. Rather [we pray] that they separate from this kind of mother, leave Bythus, withdraw from the void, abandon the shadow, and [instead] that they, having been converted to the church of God, be legitimately born, that Christ be formed in them, that they know the framer and maker of this universe, the only true God and Lord of all.<sup>55</sup>

Although Irenaeus never pits the two mothers against one another directly, he does mention in *Against Heresies* 4 how Gnostics also called their mother Jerusalem.<sup>56</sup> It is highly probable that Irenaeus has the church as mother in mind when he suggests that Gnostics should separate from their mother in order to be begotten in the church of God.<sup>57</sup> In other words, Irenaeus may have developed an ecclesial mother to compete with the Gnostic maternal imagery, which was so central to their theology.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> *AH* 3.25.7 (SC 211:488-490.81-87): ““Nos autem precamur non perseuerare eos in fouea quam ipsi foderunt, sed segregari ab eiusmodi Matre et exire a Bytho et absistere a uacuo et umbram derelinquere, et legitime eos generari conuersos ad Ecclesiam Dei et formari Christum in eis et cognoscere eos Fabricatorem et Factorem huius uniuersitatis, solum uerum Deum et Dominum omnium” (Trans. author). See also *AH* 2.18.4 and 3.15.2.

<sup>56</sup> *AH* 4.1.1.

<sup>57</sup> Plumpe overly deemphasizes the role of pagan-Gnostic influences on the development of *mater ecclesia*. While he admits the parallels between non-Christian and Christian mother images and briefly entertains the

### Tertullian's Ecclesiology and Use of *Mater Ecclesia*

The earliest patristic writers of the first and second centuries, with the exception of Irenaeus, gave little attention to the nature of the church. As one scholar has recently noted, these writers often took the existence of the church for granted and unreflectively reproduced biblical imagery to refer to it.<sup>59</sup> Due to further organizational development in response to continued proliferation of divergent beliefs, patristic writers in the late-second and early-third centuries began to explicate what and who constitutes the true church. Nowhere is this change more evident than in Tertullian's writings. As J. Quasten accurately states, "Except for Augustine, Tertullian is the most important and original ecclesiastical author in Latin."<sup>60</sup> Indeed, Tertullian refers to the nature and authentic membership of the church more frequently than any previous western Christian, and he laid the groundwork for future ecclesiological frameworks in North African theology.

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possibility of the former inspiring the latter, Plumpe also asserts the opposite can be argued that the non-Christian mothers "were wholly inconsequential factors of the Mother-Church idea" (*Mater Ecclesia*, 13). He bases this argument on two factors: 1) no real parallels exist between the two mother types, and 2) there is an absence of motherly rivalry in Christian writings. Admittedly, making causal connections from the mere existence of slight parallels should be avoided; however, complete dismissal of influence is also erroneous. The absence of parallels may just as well indicate that the non-Christian mother image had a negative influence upon the Christian development of *mater ecclesia*. It would have been very easy for nascent Christians to hypostasize the church, but the patristic writers seem to have been very cautious against this in their florid personification of it.

<sup>58</sup> J. Plumpe claims that there was little influence stemming from Gnosticism and pagan cults with regard to the origin and development of *mater ecclesia* (*Mater Ecclesia*, 9-14). However Lubac (*The Motherhood of the Church*, 47-58), Balthasar (*The Office of Peter*, 199-210), and Delahaye (*Erneuerung*, 10ff), see a stronger connection. Given the prevalence of the cults of *Dea Caelestis* and *Magna Mater* in North Africa coupled with their established influence on Mariology, I think it is highly probable that the maternal imagery in Gnosticism and pagan cults had a stronger influence than suggested by Plumpe; for their influence on Mariology, see Philippe Borgeaud's *Mother of the Gods: From Cybele to the Virgin Mary*, trans. by Lysa Hochroth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004) and Stephen Benko's *The Virgin Goddess: Studies in the Pagan and Christian Roots of Mariology* (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

<sup>59</sup> David Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, 1.

<sup>60</sup> J. Quasten, *Patrology* 2, 247.

Part of the ecclesiological legacy Tertullian left to the North African church was giving it the title of *mater ecclesia*.<sup>61</sup> No prior or contemporary writer in North Africa had used the title; neither the *Passion of the Scillitan Martyrs* nor Minucius Felix's *Octavius* contain maternal references for the church. Tertullian consistently used the term throughout his career to portray the church and its functions. Despite the consistency in his appeal, scholars have portrayed Tertullian's understanding of the *mater ecclesia* in opposing ways. Plumpe understands him to be using the term in a locative sense, being one of the first Christian thinkers to link the motherhood with the actual church building itself in order to buttress his overarching theory that western Christians were less speculative than eastern thinkers.<sup>62</sup> Rankin, on the other hand, focuses on Tertullian being the first to link the church as mother with God as father and argues that this reflects a high ecclesiological shift elevating the status of the church.<sup>63</sup> Neither theory, however, properly locates Tertullian's metaphor in its ecclesiological context and results in two divergent understandings of his use.

The purpose of this section is to analyze Tertullian's use of *mater ecclesia* in light of his ecclesiology and North African experience. I will argue that Tertullian most likely derived the image from Irenaeus and used it in similar circumstances. As such, the maternal image of the church functioned less as a comforting metaphor and more as an image to demarcate who was inside and who was outside the salvific promise of the true church. Tertullian's use does not reflect either a high or low ecclesiology in the modern

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<sup>61</sup> Rankin erroneously states that Tertullian was not the first to apply the title of mother to the church (*Tertullian and the Church*, 80). While preceding writers used maternal imagery, none explicitly had referred to the church as *mater ecclesia*.

<sup>62</sup> Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia*, 53.

<sup>63</sup> Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, 82.

sense, but an ecclesiology focused on delineation between purity/truth and impurity/falsehood, which coincides with his overarching ecclesiological agenda against the various groups he perceived as being divergent in both doctrine and discipline. Given the continuous pressures experienced by Christians in North Africa, this specific understanding of the church found particularly fertile ground and continued to be used largely in the same way that Tertullian understood it.

### 1. North Africa in the Late Second and Early Third Centuries

The origin of North African Christianity has remained obscure for modern scholars. Even Tertullian, writing in the early third century, seemed unaware of how Christianity arrived in North Africa, since he never pointed to a direct or indirect apostolic foundation for the church.<sup>64</sup> The inability to reconstruct the foundation of African Christianity has been largely due to a paucity of information. The first explicit documentation of Christians in North Africa comes from the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*,<sup>65</sup> which records the condemnation of twelve Christians under the proconsul Vigellius Saturninus on 17 July 180.<sup>66</sup> There is, however, good reason to believe that

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<sup>64</sup> T. D. Barnes, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 67.

<sup>65</sup> It is possible that Apuleius was referring to Christianity in *Met.* 9.14, which would further suggest that Christianity was active during the mid-second century and demonstrates early pagan hostility against the new religion (see Barnes, *Tertullian*, 271-3). However, the text in its derision of the miller's wife does not explicitly say she was a Christian. Some scholars have cited a supposed lost-work of the orator from Cirta, Fronto. T. D. Barnes has levied a sound argument against the rumored existence of this so-called *Oration against the Christians* (1985, 161). Barnes has also demonstrated that Apuleius's adversary in his *Apology*, Sicinius Aemilianus, was not a Christian as some have proposed (*Tertullian*, 271-2).

<sup>66</sup> H. Karpp believes that only the first six names listed in the text were original, and the final six at the end were added at a later date; see Karpp "Die Zahl der scilitanischen Märtyrer," *VigChr* 25 (1961): 165-72. A. R. Birley, however, disagrees with Karpp arguing that, while the text is an abbreviated form of the events, it is the official record; see Birley, "Persecutors and Martyrs in Tertullian's Africa" *University of London Institute of Archeology Bulletin* 29 (1992): 57 nt. 16.

Christianity had been in Africa for some time already. Scillium was a rural town located outside of Carthage. That Christianity reached the interior countryside suggests that it had a firm enough foundation to enable movement beyond the more heavily populated coastal areas where it most likely began.<sup>67</sup> The *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* also cites a Latin translation of the Bible (1 Tim 6:16), which suggests Christianity had been present long enough for a dissemination of Latin biblical texts; one of the martyrs, Speratus, had even brought a copy of Paul's letters with him to the trial.<sup>68</sup> While it is doubtful that Christianity arrived in North Africa by the close of the first century as some scholars have argued,<sup>69</sup> it would seem Christianity had been present for at least a generation by the time Scillitan Christians were brought to trial.<sup>70</sup>

More perplexing than when Christianity arrived in North Africa is how it got there. Scholars have proposed various origins for African Christianity, none of which have been without significant challenge. Some scholars have argued that the foundation of Christianity in North Africa possibly originated from eastern influence and spread through the Jewish coastal colonies in a step-wise progression. Proponents of this theory have utilized the commonalities found between the Jewish and Christian groups

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<sup>67</sup> For a good summation concerning the location of the town see Barnes, *Tertullian*, 63. G. Charles-Picard suggests, based on the names and location of the Scillitan martyrs, that the first North African Christians were rural and indigenous; see *La civilisation de l'Afrique Romaine* (Paris, 1959): 38. I would argue, however, that the names simply indicate that the Christian community was comprised of various cultural groups (see Birley, "Persecutors and Martyrs," 38-9), and, given the proximity to Carthage, it was an offshoot of that church. Moreover, Charles-Picard's theory would fail to explain the eastern character of the liturgical practices, if the church was not first founded among the Greek-speaking Carthaginians.

<sup>68</sup> See Barnes, *Tertullian*, 276-278.

<sup>69</sup> See for instance J. Mesnage, *Le Christianisme en Afrique* (1914), 53ff, and François Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, trans. Edward L. Smither (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 11.

<sup>70</sup> J. B. Rives believes that Tertullian's lack of knowledge concerning the foundation suggests Christianity had been in North Africa for quite some time; in *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage: From Augustus to Constantine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 223-5.

concerning vocabulary,<sup>71</sup> practice,<sup>72</sup> and burial locations<sup>73</sup> in North Africa. T. D. Barnes, however, has demonstrated significant problems with this theory.<sup>74</sup>

Others have attempted to demonstrate Roman origins for North African Christianity. The most recent and strongest proponent of this theory is Geoffrey D. Dunn. Basing much of his argument on Tertullian's discourse concerning the Roman church in *Prescription against Heretics*, Dunn reasons that Rome must have had a special connection with the North African churches beyond its privileged status of being the place where Peter and Paul were martyred; Rome was the parent-church of North Africa.<sup>75</sup> Detractors of this position, however, often point to the liturgical differences between the two churches and the fact that Tertullian never posited apostolic lineage for the African church.<sup>76</sup> Other scholars, hesitant to adopt either position, advocate that the

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<sup>71</sup> G. Quispel, "African Christianity before Minucius Felix and Tertullian," in *Actus: Studies in Honour of H.L.W. Nelson*, eds. J. den Boeft and A. H. M. Kessels (Utrecht: Instituut voor Klassieke Talen, 1982), 257-335.

<sup>72</sup> W. H. C. Frend, "The *Seniores Laici* and the Origins of the Church in North Africa," *JTS* 12 (1961): 280-4. For opposition to this theory see Brent D. Shaw, "The Elders of Christian Africa," in *Mélanges offerts à R. P. Etienne Geraeu* ed. P. Brind'Amour (Ottawa: Editions de l'Université d'Ottawa, 1982), 207-26.

<sup>73</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from Maccabees to Donatus* (Oxford: Blackwell), 361ff.

<sup>74</sup> Barnes, *Tertullian*, 273-5.

<sup>75</sup> Geoffrey D. Dunn, "Peter and Paul in Rome: The Perspective of the North African Church," in *Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum* 78 (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2001): 405-13; "Clement of Rome and the Question of Roman Primacy in the Early African Tradition" *Augustinianum* 43, no. 1 (2003):12-5. D. Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, 16. W. H. C. Frend entertains this possibility along with a Jewish connection in *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (repr.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 87. Rives, who strongly opposes a Jewish connection, says a Roman foundation is plausible, *Religion and Authority*, 225.

<sup>76</sup> Barnes, *Tertullian*, 67. Barnes argument is not as conclusive as he makes it seem. Just because Tertullian is unaware of the church's foundations does not necessarily exclude the possibility of a Roman foundation. Furthermore, even if there was not a direct and knowable foundation, the possibility of missionaries from Rome founding the African church is still plausible.



North African church was formed from multiple influences.<sup>77</sup> Given the various strands of Christianity present by Tertullian's time, this may be the most plausible speculation.

More important than its origins was the shared experience felt by Christians in North Africa. By the time Tertullian was actively writing, Christianity had rapidly spread throughout most cities and towns in the Roman provinces of Proconsular Africa, Numidia, and Mauretania.<sup>78</sup> Christians were also found in almost all professions and social strata.<sup>79</sup> As Tertullian famously states,

We have filled up all that is yours and now everything around you – cities, islands, citadels, free towns, market places, military camps, the lower and decurial ranks, the imperial palace, the senate, and the forum. We have left for you only your temples. . . . For now you have a small number of enemies in comparison to the multitude of Christians, with almost all of the citizens of all your cities being Christian.<sup>80</sup>

While most scholars agree that this is an exaggerated statement, Tertullian's comment could not have been devoid of some factual content if it were to have any rhetorical force. Christianity's rapid growth during the early third century can also be seen in its episcopal growth. When Agrippinus called the first North African synod (ca. 217), seventy bishops were reported to be in attendance.<sup>81</sup> Thus, despite the obscurity of its foundation, the

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<sup>77</sup> W. Telfer, "The Origins of Christianity in Africa," *SP* 4 (1961): 512-7. Susan Raven posits that Christianity came to North Africa by either eastern or Roman merchants converting the Jewish seaports first, in *Rome in Africa*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1993), 151.

<sup>78</sup> See Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 88.

<sup>79</sup> Tert. *Apol.* 37.4. See Barnes, *Tertullian*, 69-70 and Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, 17-9.

<sup>80</sup> *Apol.* 37.4,8 (CCSL 1:148.20-23, 36-38): "et orbem iam et uestra omnia impleuimus, urbes insulas, castella municipia conciliabula, castra ipsa tribus decurias, palatium senatum forum. Sola uobis reliquimus templa!...Nunc enim pauciores hostes habetis prae multitudine christianorum, paene omnium ciuitatum paene omnes ciues christianos habendo" (Trans. author).

<sup>81</sup> Cyprian, *epp.* 71.4 and 73.3.

North African church had become a visibly significant minority in less than seventy years.<sup>82</sup>

The rapid growth of Christianity, however, sparked hostile reactions from the broader society. Already by 180, Christians were brought to trial and executed. Another outbreak of persecutions took place less than twenty years later (ca. 197-8); although the numerical and geographical extent of this persecution is unknown, it was significant enough to prompt Tertullian to pen his first three writings: *To the Nations*, *Apology*, and *To the Martyrs*.<sup>83</sup> Again persecution occurred on 7 March 203 when the Proconsul Hilarianus condemned Perpetua and her fellow companions to the beasts as well as in 211 under the proconsulship of Scapula.<sup>84</sup> The latter persecution was more widespread and affected Christians in Proconsular Africa, Mauretania, and Numidia.<sup>85</sup> Even during what Sulpicius Severus described as the thirty years of peace,<sup>86</sup> Christians were still sporadically persecuted and undoubtedly experienced the same frequent harassments that

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<sup>82</sup> Tertullian claims that Christianity by this point had become a majority in cities and towns (*Scap.* 2, see also *Apol.* 2 and *Praescr. Haer.* 20). Although clearly an overemphasis to meet his rhetorical objectives, Tertullian's statement cannot be wholly dismissed and suggests major advances in the spread of Christianity (Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 88).

<sup>83</sup> Birley posits that the incidental cause of this persecution was Severus's purging of his enemies, since Tertullian (*Scap.* 2) mentions that Christians were considered traitors to the emperor and accused of following Albinus, Niger, and Cassius ("Persecutors and Martyrs," 41). Rankin, however, thinks the issue of whether or not persecutions took place between 180 and 203 is irresolvable (*Tertullian and the Church*, 12).

<sup>84</sup> Just as with the persecution of 197-8, the exact impetus is unclear. Birley suggests that the persecution may have been stimulated by either Caracalla's purges of Geta's supporters or his grant of universal citizenship, which was possibly followed with a civic sacrifice given out of appreciation by the people ("Persecutors and Martyrs," 53).

<sup>85</sup> *Scap.* 4.

<sup>86</sup> *Chronica* 2.32.2.

Tertullian reports in *To the Nations*.<sup>87</sup> Thus, Christians in North Africa experienced at least three persecutions in a span of less than forty years and a continued threat of what would have appeared to be random, isolated attacks. The very foundation of North African Christianity was set in opposition to its secular environment.

The centrality of martyrdom can easily be seen in the works of Tertullian. His first three works were explicitly stimulated by persecutions (*To the Nations*, *Apology*, *To the Martyrs*) as well as one of his last (*To Scapula*). While Tertullian gives no evidence for the practice of the cult of martyrs, a practice that will become extremely popular and controversial within fifty years' time, martyrs were clearly accorded special privilege in the North African church. Tertullian and the Carthaginian Christians understood the martyrs to possess an elevated position within the community and believed that the martyrs went directly to heaven as opposed to the rest who had to wait for the general resurrection.<sup>88</sup> Many Christians also believed that the martyrs had the special privilege of remitting sins, on the basis of their elevated status; although Tertullian later in his career wrote against this practice when it involved remitting sins committed directly against God, such as idolatry.<sup>89</sup> This focus on martyrdom remained a central characteristic in North African thought and was one of the impetuses for an uncompromisingly divisive sensibility concerning who properly belongs to the true Church.

Equally as influential on the development of Tertullian's ecclesiology were the internal tensions that resulted from variant understandings of Christianity in North Africa.

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<sup>87</sup> *Ad nat.* 1.17. See also, Cyprian *ep.* 39.3.1 (Celerina, Laurentinus, and Egnatius) and *lap.* 13 (Custus and Aemilius). For a commentary on these martyrs, T. D. Barnes, "Three Neglected Martyrs," *JTS* 22, no. 1 (1971): 159-161.

<sup>88</sup> *Res. Mort.* 43.

<sup>89</sup> *Mart.* 1 and *Pud.* 22.

This was not a simple matter between orthodoxy and heresy/schism. Such an overly simplistic dichotomy between orthodoxy and heresy has long been abandoned by scholars due to its failure to portray accurately the extreme variation of belief that existed among the North Africans. Much of Tertullian's literary output was directed towards contesting these variant understandings. He wrote the most against the various Gnostic and Marcionite groups – *Prescription against Heretics, Against Marcion, Against Hermogenes, Against the Valentinians, Antidote to the Scorpion's Sting, On the Flesh of Christ, The Resurrection of the Flesh, On Baptism* and *On the Soul* – as well as modalistic understandings of the Trinity – *Against Praxeas*.

Another variant form of Christianity appearing at this time was Montanism, a religious prophetic movement that began in West-Central Asia Minor sometime during the mid-second century. Although Montanism was later categorized as a heresy, it does not appear to be as such during the late second and early third centuries. As Christine Trevett points out, “There is nothing to suggest schism in the church of Carthage during the early decades of the Prophecy's presence.”<sup>90</sup> The main intent of Montanism was to preach those ethical revelations delivered to its prophets by the Holy Spirit. The overarching goal was to bring all of Christianity into its destined spiritual age through an intensification of discipline.<sup>91</sup>

It is unclear when Montanism reached North Africa or by what means; however, the New Prophecy gained ground quickly once in North Africa.<sup>92</sup> Not only were Perpetua

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<sup>90</sup> Christine Trevett, *Montanism: Gender, Authority and the New Prophecy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 73.

<sup>91</sup> William Tabbernee, *Montanist Inscriptions and Testimonia: Epigraphic Sources Illustrating the History of Montanism* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 23-24.

<sup>92</sup> Trevett, *Montanism*, 69-72.

and her companions possibly Montanists, but Tertullian also became associated with the movement by 207.<sup>93</sup> While never fully separating from the church, he nevertheless became embroiled in a disciplinary dispute with the bishop of Carthage concerning the bishop's *edictum peremptorium* that granted remission of sins to penitent adulterers.<sup>94</sup> In his treatise *On Modesty*, Tertullian set up a sharp distinction between the moral laxity of the carnally-minded *Psychici* and the rigorousness of the spiritual church with the latter considered being in exclusive possession of the Holy Spirit. While this did not create a schism in North Africa, it does nevertheless point to a tension concerning who properly possessed the Holy Spirit and who constituted the church, a tension that continued to exist throughout North African Christian history.<sup>95</sup>

The common experience in the North African church, therefore, was one of constant tension. There was rarely a period of peace. From its origins until the Islamic invasions, Christianity in North Africa can be characterized principally as a church in crisis. Whether provoked by external pressures from hostile governing bodies or by internal tensions created by variant forms of Christianity and schismatic movements, the North African Christianity was beset with controversy. Inevitably, this created a heightened sensibility for North African Christians to continually define and redefine the nature of the church and its membership.

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<sup>93</sup> See Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, 27-51 and D. Powell, "Tertullianists and the Cataphrygians," *VigChr* 29 (1975): 33-54. See also Rex D. Butler, *The New Prophecy and "New Visions: Evidence of Montanism in the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* (Washington D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2006).

<sup>94</sup> Scholars debate whether Tertullian is referring to the bishop of Carthage or the bishop of Rome when he calls his opponent the *pontifex maximus/episcopus episcoporum*. See Dunn, "Clement of Rome," 15.

<sup>95</sup> Frend rightly identifies this tension, but I think he incorrectly dichotomizes it as a struggle between the orthodox, who were willing to compromise with the secular environment, and the "Church of the Holy," who were hostile and uncompromising with the secular environment (*The Donatist Church*, 112-5). Neither side abandoned the centrality of holiness; rather, each side maintained it differently in response to social crises.

## 2. Tertullian's Ecclesiology

The principal mark or identification of the true church for Tertullian is unity.<sup>96</sup> As Tertullian states, “We are a body of people with a shared sense of religion, unity of discipline, and bond of hope.”<sup>97</sup> This unity is preserved in two ways for Tertullian: 1) doctrinal consensus as represented by the *regula fidei*, and 2) a shared discipline preserving the perfect holiness of the church. Although he tended to emphasize the former more in his earlier “pre-Montanist” works, both of these marks of unity are consistently found throughout Tertullian’s works.<sup>98</sup>

The *regula fidei* for Tertullian is a summary of the Christian faith that functions to distinguish true belief from false belief, Christian from non-Christian. While the *regula fidei* was not a fixed oral tradition, as even Tertullian himself exhibits three differing versions throughout his works, it was an oral, possibly catechetical teaching with a consistent structure covering the major tenets of the Christian faith.<sup>99</sup> All theological inquiry, according to Tertullian, is required to stay within the limits of the *regula fidei*.

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<sup>96</sup> Eric Osborn identifies three marks of the church in Tertullian’s thought: 1) holiness, 2) apostolicity, and 3) unity, in *Tertullian, the First Theologian of the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 178-81. However, there is nothing to suggest that Tertullian understood the first two as distinct from the third; rather, Tertullian understood them to demonstrate and preserve unity. Moreover, the change in emphasis of the first two that occur in the later stages of Tertullian’s career would suggest a less stable ecclesiology than I think is present in Tertullian’s writings.

<sup>97</sup> *Apol.* 39.1 (CCSL 1:150.4-5): “*Corpus sumus de conscientia religionis et disciplinae unitate et spei, foedere*” (Trans. author).

<sup>98</sup> I agree with Geoffrey D. Dunn who, by following the work of Christine Trevett and David Wright, does not see a major distinction in Tertullian’s “pre-“ and “post-Montanist” periods; see *Tertullian* (London: Routledge, 2004), 9.

<sup>99</sup> L. W. Countryman, “Tertullian and the Regula Fidei,” *Second Century* 2, no. 4 (1982): 208-227.

The problem with heretics is that they continue to search for truths outside of the *regula fidei*. In *Prescription against Heretics*, he states,

Faith has been deposited in the rule. It has a law and salvation coming from the observation of that law. Experience, however, depends on inquisitiveness, having its only glory come from the application of the knowledge derived from experience. Let inquisitiveness yield to faith, let glory yield to salvation. At least, let [the heretics] either stop their clamor against [the rule] or just be quiet. To know nothing against the rule is to know everything.<sup>100</sup>

For Tertullian, looking outside of the *regula fidei* is necessarily false, whether by appealing to outside sources, such as philosophy, or questioning its central tenets.<sup>101</sup> To be outside of the rule is to be outside of its professed salvation. As Tertullian states elsewhere, the rule functions as a boundary (=fossam) separating those who were saved and those who were not.<sup>102</sup> In this sense, the *regula fidei* for Tertullian operates as an intellectual form of discipline, a conscious assent against the natural curious desires that kept a person's mind pure from falsehood.

The rule itself, according to Tertullian, is primitive and apostolic. Christ gave the rule to the apostles who in turn founded various churches from which all other churches derive the same doctrine. Unity in this singular apostolicity is what proves the veracity of its teaching.<sup>103</sup> While Tertullian, like Irenaeus, uses the notion of apostolic succession to demonstrate the preservation and transmission of the rule of faith, he differs by not

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<sup>100</sup> *Praescr. Haer.* 14.4-5 (CCSL 1:198.9-13): "Fides in regula posita est, habet legem et salutem de obseruatione legis. Exercitatio autem in curiositate consistit, habens gloriam solam de peritiae studio. Cedat curiositas fidei, cedat gloria saluti. Certe aut non obstrepant aut quiescant. Aduersus regulam nihil scire omnia scire est." (Trans. author).

<sup>101</sup> *Praescr. Haer.* 7.1.

<sup>102</sup> *Praescr. Haer.* 10.5.

<sup>103</sup> *Praescr. Haer.* 20.

attributing a particular church's apostolicity to physical succession. In *Prescription against Heretics*, Tertullian states,

All doctrine, which is united with the apostolic churches – those wombs and originating sources of faith, ought to be understood as expressing the truth and undoubtedly possessing that which the churches received from the apostles, the apostles from Christ, and Christ from God. Truly, one must prejudge all doctrine that has a hint of something against the truth of the churches and apostles of Christ and God as originating from falsehood.<sup>104</sup>

Tertullian regards apostolicity more as a unity of consensus rather than as an unbroken, physical lineage to an individual.

Tertullian's notion of apostolicity is further demonstrated by his perception of the Roman church. While some scholars strain his texts to argue that he advanced papal primacy,<sup>105</sup> Tertullian, unlike Irenaeus, never singles Rome out as the symbol of apostolic unity. In fact, he lists Rome among the other apostolic churches, such as Ephesus and Philippi, and only designates it differently due to the fact that both Peter and Paul were martyred there.<sup>106</sup> Moreover, Tertullian's exegesis of Matthew 16:18-19 further negates any notion of Roman primacy. Although he understands the keys as given to Peter, he argues that the power of forgiveness was passed down to every church, not exclusively to the bishop of Rome.<sup>107</sup> Tertullian further modifies this reading in his later career when he rallies against what he perceives to be a devastating relaxation of discipline. In *On*

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<sup>104</sup> *Praescr. Haer.* 21.4-5 (CCSL 1:202-203.11-17): "omnem doctrinam, quae cum illis ecclesiis apostolicis matricibus et originalibus fidei conspiret, ueritati deputandam, id sine dubio tenentem, quod ecclesiae ab apostolis, apostoli a christo, christus a deo accepit; omnem uero doctrinam de mendacio praeiudicandam quae sapiat contra ueritatem ecclesiarum et apostolorum christi et dei" (Trans. author).

<sup>105</sup> For a more recent proponent of this theory see S. K. Ray, *Upon This Rock: St. Peter and the Primacy of Rome in Scripture and the Early Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 171.

<sup>106</sup> *Praescr. Haer.* 34. See F. A. Sullivan, *From Apostles to Bishops: The Development of the Episcopacy in the Early Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 158.

<sup>107</sup> *Praescr. Haer.* 22 and *Scorp.* 10.8.



*Modesty*, Tertullian asks, “And you presume for that reason that the power for binding and loosing has been diverted to you—that is to every church connected to Peter. What kind of person are you, destroying and entirely changing the clear intention of the Lord, conferring this [power] to Peter personally.”<sup>108</sup> Tertullian is arguing against the notion that an ecclesial office, even if it possesses historical apostolic-lineage, has the power to forgive sins. That power only belongs to those who possess the Spirit through their unified adherence to discipline. Only a person following the Paraclete in faith and action can exercise the sanctifying power of the church.<sup>109</sup>

Equally important as shared consent for Tertullian is shared action. The church, for him, functions as a teacher and guardian of moral behavior, and he often equates the church with *disciplina*.<sup>110</sup> He dedicated sixteen treatises explicitly to various disciplinary issues both before and after his involvement with the New Prophecy. For Tertullian, the church is a spotless virgin free from the contamination of idolatry that existed outside of it. Just as Christ was one, so too can there only be one spouse/church.<sup>111</sup> Anything outside of the discipline of the church, whether committed by the mind (such as allowing the existence of heresy) or by action (such as participating in pagan practices or readmitting sinners who had committed a grave sin), is tantamount to adultery and can contaminate

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<sup>108</sup> *Pud.* 21.9-10 (CCSL 2:1327.41-44): “idcirco praesumis et ad te deriuasse soluendi et alligandi potestatem, id est ad omnem ecclesiam petri propinquam? qualis es, euertens atque commutans manifestam domini intentionem personaliter hoc petro conferentem?” (Trans. author).

<sup>109</sup> The power of forgiveness, however, is still limited for Tertullian. No one, not even the martyrs, can remit sins committed directly against God (murder, fornication, adultery, etc.). Only through a personal act of martyrdom can such sins be remitted, since it functions as a second baptism (*Pud.* 22).

<sup>110</sup> Cahal B. Daly, *Tertullian the Puritan and His Influence: An Essay in Historical Theology* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1993), 6.

<sup>111</sup> *Exort. Cast.* 5.3.

the purity of the church; thus, its members need to remain pure for the preservation of the church.<sup>112</sup>

No doubt related to the martyrdom tradition already so prevalent in North Africa coupled with his own sense of apocalypticism,<sup>113</sup> Tertullian understands the church to be in direct conflict with the world and the devil. Anything outside of the church is necessarily against God and idolatrous. The holiness associated with the church was for Tertullian an empirical reality demonstrated by the actions of its members. He prefers to demonstrate this notion by comparing the church to Noah's ark. In *On Idolatry*, he states,

Indeed, we will see if in accordance to the figure of Noah's ark there will be in the church a raven, kite, wolf, dog, or snake. Certainly, it is not held that there are idolaters in the figure of Noah's ark; no animal in idolatry was figured. That which was not in the ark should not be in the church.<sup>114</sup>

For Tertullian, the historical church must be empirically free from any idolatry. While members are not completely without sin, Tertullian expects that particular sins, especially those directly against God, are not to be found in the pure church.

Baptism, for Tertullian, is the principal ritual that demonstrates a person's conscious rejection of idolatry/death and acceptance of holiness/life. Prior to the rite itself, a person was expected to have repented and to demonstrate a rejection of their former lifestyle.<sup>115</sup> Tertullian characterizes this transition as a new birth, a *nouus*

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<sup>112</sup> *Praescr. Haer.* 44.2; *Idol.* 1.2; *Spect.* 23.5-6; *Pud.* 1.8-9.

<sup>113</sup> For Tertullian's apocalypticism see Eric Osborn, *Tertullian*, 214-24 and Constantine N. Tsirpanlis, "The Antichrist and the End of the World," 15-7.

<sup>114</sup> *Idol.* 24.4 (CCSL 2:1124.4-8): "Viderimus enim si secundum arcae typum et coruus et miluus et lupus et canis et serpens in ecclesia erit. Certe idololatre in arcae typo non habetur. Nullum animal in idololatren figuratum est. Quod in arca non fuit, in ecclesia non sit" (Trans. author). See also *Bapt.* 8.4-5.

<sup>115</sup> *Paen.* 6.

*natalis*.<sup>116</sup> Once individuals are reborn, they are expected as part of their new life in Christ to uphold the discipline of the church and cease participation in idolatry.<sup>117</sup> Because he viewed such an immense dichotomy between the lives and standards of the baptized and unbaptized, he strongly advocates delaying baptism for those who cannot uphold the disciplinary rigors that is connatural with inclusion into the Christian community. In *On Baptism*, he states, “They will fear its reception more than its delay.”<sup>118</sup> For the same reason, Tertullian displays a hesitancy concerning infant baptism and recommends that it not be practiced until a person can actually consciously choose to know Christ.<sup>119</sup>

Such rebirth, according to Tertullian, is only attainable in the true church. As he states in *On Baptism*,

However, heretics, whom excommunication itself certainly attests to their not belonging to this community, possess no partnership in our discipline. I am not bound to recognize in them what has been commanded to me because there is neither one God nor one Christ between us and them – that is not the same [God or Christ]. Therefore, neither is there one baptism [between us and them] because it is not the same.<sup>120</sup>

Again, Tertullian understands there to be a rigid boundary between those who are inside the true church and those who are not. Anyone outside of the true church not only lacks

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<sup>116</sup> *Bapt.* 20.5 (CCSL 1:295.28-30): “cum de illo sanctissimo lauacro noui natalis ascenditis et primas manus apud matrem cum fratribus aperitis.”

<sup>117</sup> *Spect.* 4.1, 24.3 and *Bapt.* 15.3.

<sup>118</sup> *Bapt.* 18.6 (CCSL 1:293.39): “magis timebunt consecutionem quam dilationem” (Trans. author).

<sup>119</sup> Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 363-6.

<sup>120</sup> *Bapt.* 15.2 (CCSL 1:290.8-13): “haeretici autem nullum consortium habent nostrae disciplinae, quos extraneos utique testatur ipsa ademptio communicationis. Non debeo in illis cognoscere quod mihi est praeceptum, quia nec deus unus est nobis et illis nec unus christus, id est idem: ergo nec baptismum unum quia non idem.” (Trans. author).

the life-giving ritual but also lacks the same God. Anything outside of the church is necessarily different and thereby false.

More so than Irenaeus, Tertullian creates an uncompromising ecclesiology that physically separates insiders and outsiders. As Geoffrey D. Dunn correctly states,

Tertullian's Christianity had no room for tepidity or grayness. He had the enthusiasm and zeal of a fanatic, the rigour and clarity of the recently converted, and the intolerance and righteousness of the self-assured. He was a partisan and an extremist. Nothing less than perfection was the requirement for being his kind of Christian and, for him, there could be no other kind.<sup>121</sup>

Indeed, Tertullian's church is empirically holy and demonstrable through its adherence to discipline and doctrine. Anything or anyone opposed to this is necessarily against God and outside of the church. For him, the ritual of baptism signifies a person's rebirth into this uncompromising rigor and a pledge to maintain it. Failure to uphold the community's standards inevitably results in exclusion from the community, as no one can be considered Christian unless he/she perseveres to the very end.<sup>122</sup> Tertullian's emphasis on discerning where and among whom the holiness of the church resides remained a constant issue in the North African church.

### **3. Tertullian's Use of *Mater Ecclesia***

Tertullian uses the image of the church as mother to designate a person's relationship to the true church. It is therefore no surprise that he associates the ritual of baptism, which he understands to signify the rebirth of an individual into an eternal life, with the motherhood of the Church. In *On Baptism*, Tertullian states,

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<sup>121</sup> Dunn, *Tertullian*, 10.

<sup>122</sup> *Praescr. Haer.* 3.6.

Therefore, blessed ones, whom the grace of God awaits, when you rise from that most holy bath of your new birth and for the first time spread your hands before your mother with your brothers, petition from the Father, petition from the Lord to be supplied with the inheritance of grace and the distribution of charismas.<sup>123</sup>

While some scholars argue that Tertullian understood the church's motherhood in a locative sense (*apud matrem = in domo matris*), indicating the catechumen's physical movement from the baptistery to the main building of the church,<sup>124</sup> I am less inclined to read the above passage this way for three reasons. First, there is no literary or architectural evidence outside of this passage to suggest the use of baptisteries.<sup>125</sup> Second, Tertullian allows any kind of body of water to be used for baptism, which suggests a lack of normative practice contraindicative of having a baptistery.<sup>126</sup> Third, he never links the parturient qualities of the baptismal font to the motherhood of the church. Given the frequent and direct association made between womb/font and mother/church in later North African architecture and writing, it seems odd that Tertullian did not make the obvious metaphorical connection if he had a locative understanding of the church's motherhood. He more likely understood the catechumens' relationship to the mother in an associative sense with the mother conceived of as the totality of the community. *Apud* should not be taken as *in domo matris* but rather interpreted relationally as a nearness in respect of persons.

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<sup>123</sup> *Bapt.* 20.5 (CCSL 1:295.28-32): "Igitur benedicti quos gratia dei expectat, cum de illo sanctissimo lauacro noui natalis ascenditis et primas manus apud matrem cum fratribus aperitis, petite de patre, petite de domino peculia gratiae distributiones charismatum subiacere" (Trans. author).

<sup>124</sup> Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia*, 51-4.

<sup>125</sup> See J. G. Davies, *The Architectural Setting of Baptism* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1962), 1-2.

<sup>126</sup> *Bapt.* 4.

For Tertullian, once a person is baptized into the church, his or her relationship changed. A person now can claim God as a father by being children of *mater ecclesia*. As David Rankin comments, “We are moving closer to a point when the acknowledgement of the church as ‘mother’ becomes a prerequisite for that of God as ‘father,’ and acceptance by the latter becomes somewhat dependent on that by the former.”<sup>127</sup> Not only does Tertullian make this link in *On Baptism*, but he also clearly does so in *On Prayer*: “Not even our mother, the church, is passed by because the mother, from whom the name of Father and Son corresponds to, is recognized in the Son and Father.”<sup>128</sup> This pairing of God the Father and the church the mother is again repeated in *On Monogamy*.<sup>129</sup> Tertullian was the first patristic writer to make such a link between the fatherhood of God and motherhood of the church. This is a significant development in the maternal metaphor and will form the basis for Cyprian’s later understanding of the church and its maternal function.

True motherhood, according to Tertullian, is exclusive to the church alone, and a person can only claim to be a child of God if they were in proper relationship with the mother. Heretics cannot claim to have a mother because they were outside the unity of the church. For Tertullian, heretics are inherently parasitic since they are formed out of something else and work to destroy that very thing from which they came. In *Prescription against Heretics*, he states,

Again, all heresies that have been thoroughly investigated are discovered to be of differing opinions in many things even among their own leaders.

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<sup>127</sup> Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, 81.

<sup>128</sup> *Orat.* 2.6 (CCSL 1:258.14-16): “Ne mater quidem ecclesia praeteritur, siquidem in filio et patre mater recognoscitur, de qua constat et patris et filii nomen” (Trans. author).

<sup>129</sup> *De Monog.* 7.9 (CCSL 2:1239.64): “Viuit enim unicus pater noster deus et mater ecclesia.”

For the most part, they do not have churches – outcasts without a mother, home, or faith – exiles roving like hissing serpents.<sup>130</sup>

For Tertullian, the motherhood of the church is exclusionary and demarcates those who are in association with it from those who are not.

Not only does Tertullian apply the exclusivity of *mater ecclesia* against heretics but also against those who fail to uphold the standards of the community. In *On Idolatry*, he states that the faith of the church will be directed to “bemoaning that a Christian might come from idols into the church, come from the workshop of the enemy into the house of God, raise their hands, the mothers of idols, to God the Father.”<sup>131</sup> As with his understanding of heresy, Tertullian locates the creation of idolatry outside of the church in a different workshop, where the hands of an individual become the mother or artificer of idols. Unless individuals are in full communion with the true church and free from the contamination of idolatry, they cannot properly claim to be a child of the true mother. He again invokes this imagery in *On Modesty* when he argues that all those who sin against God, even adulterers, must remain repentant outside of the church: “Together they remain fixed according to the duty of penance; they bristle in sackcloth and ash; they groan with the same tears; they go around with the same prayers; they entreat on the same knees; they evoke the same mother.”<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> *Praescr. Haer.* 42.9-10 (CCSL 1:222.19-23): “Denique penitus inspectae haereses omnes in multis cum auctoribus suis dissentientes deprehendunt. Plerique nec ecclesias habent, sine matre, sine sede, orbi fide, extorres quasi sibilati uagantur” (Trans. author).

<sup>131</sup> *Idol.* 7.1 (CCSL 2:1106.12-15): “perorabit ingemens: christianum ab idolis in ecclesiam uenire, de aduersaria officina in domum dei uenire, attollere ad deum patrem manus matres idolorum” (Trans. author).

<sup>132</sup> *Pud.* 5.14 (CCSL 2:1289.53-56): “Pariter de paenitentiae officio sedent, in sacco et cinere inhorrescunt, eodem fletu ingemiscunt, eisdem precibus ambiunt, eisdem genibus exorant, eandem inuocant matrem” (Trans. author).

Tertullian utilizes maternal imagery in another disciplinary work, *On Monogamy*. He argues what he perceives to be a median position between the overly ascetic attitude of the Gnostics, who repudiate marriage, and the overly licentious individuals in the church, who allow remarriage. Against those who argue for remarriage on the basis of creating heirs, he rages,

No doubt a Christian, being disinherited from the whole world, will seek heirs! He has brothers; he has the church as his mother. It is different if they believe action before Christ is taken according to the Julian laws and judge that the unmarried and childless are not able to receive the full inheritance of God.<sup>133</sup>

Tertullian's opponents were concerned that because of the *lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus* and *lex Papia Poppaea*, which were a set of laws emperor Augustus enacted in 18 BCE and 9 CE to promote the child-bearing among the Roman elite through an complex set of civil benefits and sanctions, marriage and the propagation of offspring were necessary in order to avoid its testamentary penalties, which could be quite restrictive. Typically, the unmarried could not inherit, and childless couples could only inherit half of the benefits.<sup>134</sup> Thus, Christian celibates and young widows who did not remarry could expect such testamentary penalties.

Tertullian, who understood Christianity to be fundamentally opposed to the world, argues that in the church a person has a mother and brethren, and Christ (unlike the government) does not penalize the childless. He goes so far as to link those not ascribing to this intensified discipline with the apocalypse. In *On Monogamy*, he states,

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<sup>133</sup> *De Monog.* 16.4 (CCSL 2:1251.21-24): "Haeredes scilicet christianus quaeret saeculi totius exhaeres. Habet fratres, habet ecclesiam matrem. Aliud est, si et apud christum legibus iuliis agi credunt, et existimant caelibes et orbos ex testamento dei solidum non posse capere" (Trans. author).

<sup>134</sup> *Tit. Ulp.* 13-16.



Let them collect enough seasonable fruits from their repeated marriages for the last time – breasts heaving, wombs afflicted, infants crying. Let them prepare [children] for the Antichrist on whom he may more passionately rage against. He will lead them to murderous midwives.<sup>135</sup>

Because those who do not follow the law of the Paraclete are outside of the true church in Tertullian's mind, the children do not belong to the life-giving mother but a midwife who will murder them.<sup>136</sup>

Like Irenaeus, Tertullian understands that the church's maternity is prefigured in the Old Testament. Tertullian, however, sees the church as prefigured in Eve rather than in Paradise. In *On the Soul*, he links the two figures: "For if Adam was given as a figure for Christ, then Adam's sleep was [the shadow] of Christ's death, who was to sleep in death, so that in like manner from the wound in his side, the church, the true mother of the living, was figured."<sup>137</sup> Just as Eve was the one mother of all humans and the spouse of Adam, the church likewise functions in the salvific recapitulation of the original failing as the mother of eternal life and the spouse of the new Adam; and just as Eve had come from the wound of Adam, so too did the church originate from the wound of Christ.<sup>138</sup>

Tertullian understands the mother, as the new Eve, to be holy and linked to the heavenly

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<sup>135</sup> *De Monog.* 16.5 (CCSL 2:1252.32-35): "Satis opportunos nouissimis temporibus fructus iteratis matrimoniis colligant, ubera fluitantia et uteros nauseantes et infantes pipiantes. Parent antichristo, in quae libidinosius saeuat. Adducet illis carnifices obstetrices" (Trans. author).

<sup>136</sup> There is an interesting passage in *Against the Valentinians* (3.3) where Tertullian likens Gnosticism to the far-fetched lullabies that nurses (*nutricula*) recited to children. Tertullian always ascribes a negative quality to anyone who is not a true mother or part of the nuclear triad; such an ideal may come from his own indebtedness to stoicism. While some philosophers, such as the sophist Favorinus (Aul. Gell. *NA* 12.1.17), viewed *nutrices* in a negative light, they were not understood as mother substitutes in practice; see, Suzanne Dixon's, *The Roman Mother* (London: Routledge, 1990), 141-61. For a good analysis of the role and prevalence of wet nurses in Roman society, see Keith R. Bradley's *Discovering the Roman Family: Studies in Roman Social History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 13-29.

<sup>137</sup> *De anim.* 43.10 (CCSL 2:847.62-65): "Si enim adam de christo figuram dabat, somnus adae mors erat christi dormituri in mortem, ut iniuria perinde lateris eius uera mater uiuentium figuraretur ecclesia" (Trans. author).

<sup>138</sup> cf. *De Monog.* 5.7.

Jerusalem.<sup>139</sup> There is no suggestion in his extant works that Tertullian believed there to be a link between Mary-Eve-church. The closest association he makes is in *Against Marcion*: “For it is not good, He said, that the man is alone. He knew what a benefit the sex of Mary and then of the Church would be to him.”<sup>140</sup> However, Tertullian here is only speaking of the gendered pre-figurement that both Mary and the church share.

The oddest maternal reference in Tertullian’s works is in *On the Antidote to the Scorpion’s Sting*, where he states, “Wisdom, he said, has slain her own children. Sophia is wisdom. Certainly she has slain them wisely so long as in life, reasonably so long as in glory.”<sup>141</sup> Although some scholars have conjectured that Tertullian is identifying Sophia with the pre-existent church, akin to that in 2 John 1, this is a faulty reading of the text.<sup>142</sup> He is not referring here to the church but using Proverbs 9:2 (“She has killed her beasts”) against the argument made by some Gnostics that God is needlessly murdering his own children (i.e., the martyrs). Tertullian, while calling Sophia mother, clearly equates her with God when he says that she killed her only Son.<sup>143</sup> There is no notion in Tertullian,

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<sup>139</sup> *Marc.* 5.4.8 and *De carn.* 7.2. Rankin argues that except for the passage in *Against Marcion*, Tertullian never directly links holiness to the motherhood of the Church (*Tertullian and the Church*, 82). Given Tertullian’s overall ecclesiology coupled with his emphasis of the church’s maternity as demarcating ecclesial membership, I argue that her holiness is implied in all of those instances and is confirmed by the passage in *Against Marcion*.

<sup>140</sup> *Marc.* 2.4.5 (CCSL 1:479.18-20): “Non est enim, inquit, bonum solum esse hominem. Sciebat illi sexum mariae et deinceps ecclesiae profuturum” (Trans. author).

<sup>141</sup> *Scorp.* 7.1 (CCSL 2:1081.1-2): “Sophia, inquit, iugulauit filios suos. Sophia sapientia est. Sapienter utique iugulauit, dum in uitam, et rationaliter, dum in gloriam” (Trans. author).

<sup>142</sup> Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, 78-9.

<sup>143</sup> *Scorp.* 7.3.

or any early church father, for a pre-existent church existing separately from its members.<sup>144</sup>

#### 4. Tertullian's Sources for *Mater Ecclesia*

Tertullian never justifies or explains his use of *mater ecclesia*. This is most likely due to an already universal acceptance of understanding the church as a mother.

Commenting on his use of *mater* to refer to the church, Plumpe states,

Nowhere is there any suggestion that such personification and title are regarded as something new or recently introduced. As a matter of fact, it is clear that the concept of the Church's motherhood was even more familiar than it is to Catholics today; in a single reference in a treatise or sermon we should scarcely use the term 'Mother' alone in making reference to the Church.<sup>145</sup>

Tertullian never explicitly parallels the maternity of the church with a scriptural antecedent. He simply references the church as mother and anticipates his audience to readily recognize the metaphor.

The apparent widespread acceptance of this ecclesial appellation, however, has left scholars with little evidence concerning Tertullian's scriptural and patristic sources. Some scholars try to connect his understanding of the church as mother with Revelation 12:1ff.<sup>146</sup> However, he never explicitly cites this passage.<sup>147</sup> Plumpe, based on the work

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<sup>144</sup> Elsewhere, Tertullian clearly equates the maternity of the church with the actions of its members. In *Mart.* (1.1), the spiritual and material support given to the confessors from the community is metaphorically described as coming from the bountiful breasts of Mother Church. Tertullian understands the church's motherhood as a reflection of communal identity rather than as an attribute of a pre-existent, heavenly entity.

<sup>145</sup> Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia*, 60.

<sup>146</sup> Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, 79 and 82.

<sup>147</sup> *Marc.* 3.25. Here he does connect the church to Revelation 21:2.

of F. J. Dölger, suggests that, at least in *To the Martyrs* where Tertullian refers to the church as “*domina mater ecclesia*,” his scriptural antecedent may have been 2 John 1 and 5 where the author refers to a Christian community as the “Elect Lady” (ἑκλεκτὴ κυρία).<sup>148</sup> David Rankin agrees with this conclusion and adds that this is the only place where Tertullian portrays the church as a nursing mother, one of the dominant New Testament themes.<sup>149</sup>

It is unclear, however, whether Tertullian has 2 John 1 in mind or if he received the association of the elect lady with the church from another patristic source. While the *Shepherd of Hermas* uses similar language, the motherly image in Tertullian is used differently than in the *Shepherd of Hermas* where the matron is portrayed as a cosmically, pre-existent revelator.<sup>150</sup> Moreover, Tertullian had clear reservations with the text and eventually repudiated it as apocryphal.<sup>151</sup> More than likely, the understanding of the church as *domina/kυρία* was a widely accepted exegesis of 2 John 1 and 5 by this point.

The only other place where Tertullian associates the maternity of the church with Scripture is in *Against Marcion*. Here, he argues against Marcion’s commentary on Galatians 4-6, that Marcion tampered with the text and its meaning. He reports Marcion’s reconstruction of Galatians 4:21-31 where Paul interprets Genesis 21:9-12, the story of

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<sup>148</sup> *Mart.* 1.1 (CCSL 1:3.3). Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia*, 48. See also F. J. Dölger, “*Domina Mater Ecclesia* und die ‘Herrin’ im zweiten Johannesbrief,” *AChr* 5 (1936): 214-17.

<sup>149</sup> Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church*, 80.

<sup>150</sup> See 1.2.4 and 1.3.3; a similar portrayal can be found in 2 Clement 2.1 and 14.1-4.

<sup>151</sup> *Orat.* 16 and *Pud.* 10.

Sarah and Hagar, in light of Isaiah 54:1 and presents the church as mother.<sup>152</sup> Plumpe discounts this passage from being numbered among Tertullian's references to *mater ecclesia* because Tertullian is quoting Marcion whom he claims is a falsifier of Galatians.<sup>153</sup> While Tertullian certainly disagrees with Marcion interpreting this passage as proof for two separate deities and oppositional covenants, it nevertheless demonstrates that Tertullian was fully aware of Galatians 4:21-31 and its implicit reference to the church as mother. Tertullian again cites the Pauline passage in *Against Marcion*, but this time positively as it pertains to his own understanding of the apocalypse and the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:2.<sup>154</sup> Paralleling Irenaeus's understanding in *Demonstration of Apostolic Teaching*, Tertullian understands the motherly church as Jerusalem through Paul's exegesis of Isaiah 54:1. Regrettably, his work *On the Hope of the Faithful* is no longer extant. Because it was a treatise focused on his defense of an allegorical understanding of the restoration prophecies in the Old Testament as Christ and the church, this work could shed more light on Tertullian's scriptural understanding of *mater ecclesia*.

The most likely place that Tertullian derived his maternal imagery was from Irenaeus. Not only does he directly refer to Irenaeus in *Against Valentinus*, but he also bases his presentation of Valentinian Gnosticism on Book 1 of Irenaeus's *Against Heresies*.<sup>155</sup> While there is scholarly dispute over which edition of *Against Heresies* Tertullian used, there is little doubt that he was very familiar with the text and used it

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<sup>152</sup> *Marc.* 5.4.

<sup>153</sup> Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia*, 9 nt. 20.

<sup>154</sup> *Marc.* 3.25.

<sup>155</sup> See *Adu. Valent.* 5. Dillon, *Against the Heresies*, 14-15.

heavily.<sup>156</sup> Given Irenaeus's place in the explicit development of maternal imagery in the church, and Tertullian's dependence on *Against Heresies*, it is probable that Irenaeus functioned as the main source for Tertullian's maternal imagery. Moreover, both authors share common themes and conditions for their usages of the metaphor. Both use the motherhood of the church to delineate who is inside and outside the true Christian community. Both also understand *mater ecclesia* to be prefigured in the creation account and accord it a significant position in the recapitulation of humanity. Both utilize the metaphor against variant forms of Christianity that they regard as doctrinally problematic. Tertullian of course developed the metaphor to meet his own ecclesiological needs. Tertullian's Mother Church is even more exclusionary and association with her more dependent upon members' disciplinary rigor. Nevertheless, the foundation of Tertullian's use appears to be derived largely from Irenaeus.

### **Conclusion**

The development of *mater ecclesia* in early patristic writing follows the ecclesiological changes that took place. While various biblical precedents existed for perceiving a maternal function of the church, the florid imagery and eventual appellation was primarily the creative result of two particular patristic thinkers, Irenaeus and Tertullian. Both found within this image a useful metaphor for understanding the church

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<sup>156</sup> Although scholars agree that Tertullian used Irenaeus's *Against Heresies* in *Against the Valentinians*, they disagree whether Tertullian used a Greek or Latin version. While a Latin version of *Against Heresies* certainly existed by the first decades of the fifth century (see B. Altaner, "Augustinus und Irenäus: Eine quellenkritische Untersuchung," *TQ* 129 (1949): 162-172), it is less clear whether or not one existed beforehand, and most scholars who are in favor of an earlier dating argue that Tertullian used a Latin version of *Against Heresies*. For a good historiography of the debate see Dillon, *St. Irenaeus of Lyons*, 14-15 and 121-3 (nts. 74-5).

as a welcoming yet exclusionary association of people defined over and against other competing groups and the secular culture. This particular understanding will become the dominant understanding of the church's maternity in subsequent western thought. Tertullian's particular portrayal especially will be continued in North African ecclesiology. Cyprian will capitalize on Tertullian's association between God the Father and the church as mother to make even more exclusionary the role of the *mater ecclesia*. Tertullian clearly influenced the *Poem against Marcion*, an anonymous work once attributed to Tertullian but probably written in Gaul around the mid-fifth century.<sup>157</sup> The text, which was dependent upon Tertullian's *Against Marcion*, calls the church the "true mother of a living people" and utilizes Galatians 4:27 to argue for a harmonization of the Old and New Testaments against Marcion's claims of supersession.<sup>158</sup> While succeeding patristic thinkers will continue to nuance their understanding of *mater ecclesia* due to their own particular ecclesial situations and concerns, both Irenaeus and Tertullian provide the connotative foundation for the metaphor in the West.

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<sup>157</sup> The date and location of composition of the poem *Carmen aduersus Marcionem* is uncertain. While some have identified the author as a certain bishop, Victorinus, due to an obscure reference made by Isidore of Seville (*De uiris illustribus*, 8) and the anonymous author of *De duodecim scriptoribus ecclesiasticis*, the most recent commentator on the subject, Karla Pollmann, does not identify the poet; see *Das Carmen aduersus Marcionitas* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 12-16. For a good overview of the debates, see R. Willems, *Carmen aduersus Marcionem* in CCSL 2 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1954), 1419-20.

<sup>158</sup> *carm. Marc.* 2.194 (CCSL 2:1431.194): "haec populi uera est uiuentis ecclesia mater." The author associates the church's origins to 1) the apostolic word, and 2) the wounds of Christ with the blood representing the woman/church and the water representing the font (2.250ff). Oddly, the author links baptism with the womb of Christ rather than the church (3.170ff).

## CHAPTER III

### DEVELOPING THE CHURCH'S EXCLUSIVE MATERNITY: CYPRIAN

Cyprian's use of *mater ecclesia* is well documented by historians and theologians.<sup>1</sup> He employed the term over thirty times during his pastoral career and created one of the most well-known and oft-repeated dictums in Christianity: "One cannot have God for a Father who does not have the church for a mother."<sup>2</sup> *Mater ecclesia* functioned as one of the central metaphors through which Cyprian conveyed his understanding of the church. In this chapter, I will examine his use of *mater ecclesia* as it relates to the particular way in which he developed North African ecclesiology in response to various internal and external polemics.

The first section will survey Cyprian's ecclesiology and the context in which it developed. Particular attention will be given to the shift of authority and the role of purity in his ecclesial understanding and, more specifically, his move from a local understanding of the Christian community to a more universal ecclesiology represented by the college of bishops. The second section will examine chronologically Cyprian's various applications of *mater ecclesia* with a focus on the periodic modifications he made to the metaphor. The remaining section will briefly detail the occurrences of *mater ecclesia* in the works of other contemporary North African writers.

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<sup>1</sup> See Delahaye, *Ecclesia mater*, 100-8; Jensen, "Mater Ecclesia and Fons Aeterna," 142-44; Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia*, 81-108; Balthasar, *Office of Peter*, 193-4; Lubac, *Motherhood of the Church*, 47-58.

<sup>2</sup> *unit.* 6 (CCSL 3:253.149-50): "Habere iam non potest Deum patrem qui ecclesiam non habet matrem" (Trans. author).



Overall, I will argue that Cyprian's use of *mater ecclesia* is much more nuanced than previously argued. I will demonstrate that his appeal to the image of mother evolved over time and was dependent on the changes he made to his ecclesiology. Although earlier in his career he portrayed *mater ecclesia* in more graphic or earthly terms, he transformed the metaphor later in his career, giving it a more speculative or theoretical quality. As he moved from a local understanding of the Christian community to a more universal notion, the image of the mother also changed, becoming less of a passive representation of the local community to more of an active dispenser of graces whose purity and authority was predicated on the universal college of bishops. In doing so, Cyprian's notion of mother (and church), while still *super terram* and rooted in present historical realities, functioned more abstractly than previously considered.

## **Context and Ecclesiology**

### **1. Cyprian's Early Ecclesiology**

When Cyprian was elected to succeed Donatus as the bishop of Carthage in 249, he became the most powerful bishop of North Africa not only because of his own personal stature, as a once-famed teacher of rhetoric,<sup>3</sup> but also because the see of Carthage itself was located in one of the more powerful urban centers of the Roman world; this automatically gave its bishop a certain amount of prestige and patronage over

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<sup>3</sup> G. W. Clarke demonstrates Cyprian's class based upon Cyprian's education and other scattered references, see Clarke, *The Letters of St. Cyprian, Vol. 1* (New York: Newman Press, 1984), 14. Concerning Cyprian's pre-Christian career, many scholars assumingly refer to Cyprian as having been an advocate or lawyer. Clarke, however, convincingly argues that one can only claim with assurance that Cyprian was a teacher of rhetoric, see Clarke, "The Secular Profession of St. Cyprian of Carthage," *Latomus* 24 (1965): 633-38. See also Michael M. Sage, *Cyprian* (Cambridge, MA: Philadelphia Patristic Foundation, 1975), 109-13.

other bishops in the province.<sup>4</sup> Compared to his intense epistolary activity that began shortly after the Decian persecution and continued until his martyrdom under Valerian and Gallienus in 257, there are no extant epistles dated to this period, making reconstruction of his early episcopate and the social and ecclesial lives of his Carthaginian community more difficult to establish.<sup>5</sup> He did, however, produce a compendium of scriptural verses for a certain Quirinius, *Testimonies* (ca. 249), as well as a practical treatise, *On the Dress of Virgins* (249), exhorting improved discipline among the virgins and laity.<sup>6</sup> From these two contemporary works and later epistles, it is possible to create a general portrait of the pre-Decian community under Cyprian. Two features of this community's ecclesiology particularly stand out: 1) a high degree of lay involvement and 2) an emphasis on the purity of the local church.

Lay involvement among the Carthaginian church is most apparent in the election of its bishops. Although the exact protocol of the process is unclear, the entire religious

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey D. Dunn, "Cyprian and his *Collegae*: Patronage and the Episcopal Synod of 252," *JRH* 27, no. 1 (2003): 6ff. See also C. H. Turner, *Studies in Early Church History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), 71ff.

<sup>5</sup> While some scholars have assigned *epp.* 1, 3, 4 and 63 earlier dates, Clarke has demonstrated that none of these letters are to be dated before the Decian persecution (see Clarke, *Letters 1*, 148, 164-5, 170-1; G. W. Clarke, *The Letters of St. Cyprian, Vol. 3* (New York: Newman Press, 1986), 287-8). Concerning the social and economic experiences that can be reconstructed from Cyprian's work see Daniel D. Sullivan's dissertation, *The Life of North Africans as Revealed in the Works of Saint Cyprian* (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1933).

<sup>6</sup> Although *To Donatus* was composed shortly after Cyprian's conversion ca. 246, it provides no substantial information concerning Cyprian's ecclesiology, since he was not yet a bishop. For the dating of the treatises, see Sage, *Cyprian*, 377-83. Some scholars have argued that *On Works and Almsgiving* was composed around the same time as *On the Dress of Virgins*; see L. Wohleb, "Cyprian *de opera et eleemosynis*" *ZNTW* 25 (1926): 270-8. Charles Bobertz unconvincingly argues that *Testimonies* comes from a prior North African ecclesial tradition and should not be considered part of Cyprian's corpus not only because of Pontius's use of the text coupled with its exclusion from his list of Cyprian's works but also because of discrepancies between the *Testimonies* and other works in scriptural citations and theology; see Bobertz, "An Analysis of *Vita Cypriani* 3:6-10 and the Attribution of *Ad Quirinum* to Cyprian of Carthage," *VigChr* 46, no. 2 (1992): 112-128. For more convincing arguments for inclusion of *Testimonies* see Hugo Koch's *Cyprianische Untersuchungen* (Bonn, 1926), 30; Michael Fahey's *Cyprian and the Bible: A Study of Third-Century Exegesis* (Tubingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1971), 20; Sage, *Cyprian*, 379-80.

community in company with the neighboring bishops controlled the selection and election of its bishop.<sup>7</sup> Through the will of the people and clerics, the divine will (*de dei et Christi iudicio*) was believed to be made manifest, thus guaranteeing the choice of the people and the position of its new leader.<sup>8</sup> The consensus of the laity was so strong in the Carthaginian church that it could outweigh the preference of the clergy, as is most evident in Cyprian's election to the episcopate. Rather than elect an elder presbyter, which was the more common practice, the community instead chose Cyprian, probably because of his secular status and dedication to ecclesial discipline. Yet, he was still considered a neophyte, having been a Christian for only two years and a presbyter for scarcely one, and it is clear that the majority of his fellow presbyters were not pleased with the community's decision.<sup>9</sup> Presumably as long as the community retained its cohesion, the authority of their choice would not be challenged by the disgruntled presbyters.

The involvement of the laity extended beyond episcopal elections as they had authority in the appointment of clergy as well. When Cyprian unilaterally appointed clerics during his self-imposed exile, he felt obliged to give the community his rationale, in clear recognition of their traditional role and authority in the matter.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the

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<sup>7</sup> For a good summary of the episcopal election process in the third century as well as the scholarly debates surrounding the exact protocol see Patrick Granfield's "Episcopal Elections in Cyprian: Clerical and Lay Participation," *TS* 37, no. 1 (1976): 45-52. Granfield convincingly argues that the bishop's *consensus* added canonical force and ratified the community's decision rather than determining it as P. Battifol argues in *L'Eglise naissante et le catholicisme* (Paris, 1909), 402.

<sup>8</sup> *ep.* 55.8.4 (CSSL 3B:265.133-34). See also 59.5.2 and 68.2.1.

<sup>9</sup> Pontius, *Vita*, 5. Cyprian, *ep.* 43.1.2. At the time Cyprian wrote *ep.* 43, only three presbyters supported Cyprian while he was in exile whereas five presbyters had openly rebelled. If all five of the rebellious presbyters are indeed the same who opposed Cyprian's election, as Cyprian himself suggests, then the majority of the Carthaginian presbyters were outvoted by the laity in Cyprian's election.

<sup>10</sup> *epp.* 29, 38, and 39.

lay members were also expected to use their collective power to defend the standards of the community. The community had the power not only to pressure other members and clerics who failed to uphold set standards, but they were also involved in determining penitential action<sup>11</sup> and in extreme circumstances were encouraged to reject a bishop who was determined unworthy.<sup>12</sup>

Although there was a high degree of lay involvement and control in the Carthaginian church, the Christian community was nevertheless hierarchical in nature, with the bishop functioning as “the chief officer of the church.”<sup>13</sup> Cyprian managed the common funds, acted as an advocate, and was involved in the appointment and regulation of the clergy. He was also the center of religious life as he presided over the Eucharist and the imposition of hands during the rituals of baptism and repentance. Most importantly, Cyprian’s role as bishop was to safeguard the disciplinary standards and purity of the community.

Cyprian referred to the purity of the community as the “*retinaculum fidei*” or the “bond of faith.”<sup>14</sup> The bond of faith, maintained through the discipline of the group, held the community together despite the various hierarchical, economic, and social differences

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<sup>11</sup> Lay involvement initially included determining the reconciliation of clerics (*ep.* 34.4.1) and the lapsed (*ep.* 14.4) as well as participation in synods (*epp.* 17.3.2 and 20.3.3).

<sup>12</sup> *epp.* 65.4.2, 66.10.1, 67.3.1-5, and 68.2.1-4.3.

<sup>13</sup> J. Patout Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 15. For a good summary of the roles of the bishop see Richard Seagraves’s *Pascentes Cum Disciplina: A Lexical Study of Clergy in the Cyprianic Correspondence* (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1993), 66-70, and John D. Laurance’s “‘Priest’ as Type of Christ: The Leader of the Eucharist in Salvation History according to Cyprian of Carthage” (New York: Peter Lang, 1983), 195-220.

<sup>14</sup> *habitu.* 1 (CSEL 3.1:187.1).

that existed between individual members.<sup>15</sup> The bond of faith was largely defined over and against the secular culture, which they considered contagiously impure and deadly. Although Carthaginian Christians certainly participated in the Roman army and economy, they also were expected to go to great lengths to avoid various customary practices.<sup>16</sup> The Christian community in contrast to the secular world was considered pure and life-giving. Through baptism, an individual was initiated into the community and became a shared participant of its purity. Continual membership in the community was predicated on one's acceptance of and adherence to its values. Although baptism was efficacious in cleansing a person, the grace of baptism was lost if a person failed to uphold the moral purity of the group. Any recalcitrant sinner was viewed and treated the same as a non-Christian: they were considered polluted and excluded from the community.

Reinstatement to the group required a public ritual of confession and forgiveness culminating with the imposition of hands by the bishop. Like baptism, this ritual was allowed only once during a Christian's life. However, early Christians did not believe that all sins could be forgiven by the church. Sins committed directly against God, such as apostasy (Mt 10:32-33) or those outlined at the meeting of Jerusalem (Acts 15), were thought to be forgiven by God alone.<sup>17</sup> Rather than risk the purity and salvation of the

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<sup>15</sup> In *habitu*. 5, 7-9, 14-19 the consecrated virgins in particular appear to come from wealthy backgrounds and boast of their riches (see also *lap.* 6 and *ep.* 11.1.2). Cyprian, however, is not always consistent on what binds the ecclesial community. Elsewhere, Cyprian says "charity is the bond of brotherhood" (*caritas fraternitatis uinculum est*), *de patien.* 15 (CCSL 3A:126.282).

<sup>16</sup> See for instance Cyprian's admonishments to those who are behaving in a Roman fashion (*lap.* 6 and 30).

<sup>17</sup> Cyprian lists adultery, fraud, and manslaughter as the three major mortal sins (*de patien.* 14). Idolatry is missing from this list most likely because *On the Good of Patience* was written in the early months of 256, and thus, long after the North African churches allowed reconciliation of the lapsed.

entire community, temporal reconciliation was denied for such sins, and anyone who had committed them had to remain in exclusion from the church and in a continual state of penance hoping for divine mercy at their death.

Cyprian strongly believed that maintaining discipline and purity was essential to the salvific status and temporal safety of the community. While he extensively uses the language of contamination, he does not suggest that sinful laity *physically* contaminate the church or its Eucharist. Rather, he sees it as a moral contamination, which he clearly expresses in *On the Dress of Virgins*. Against the wealthy virgins who were dressing immodestly (*immodestas*), Cyprian maintains that they should no longer be counted among the virgins, but should “like infected sheep and diseased cattle, to be driven from the holy and pure flock of virginity, lest by living together they should pollute the rest with their contagion; lest they ruin others even as they have perished themselves.”<sup>18</sup> Cyprian’s fear is that the ill-disciplined virgins would morally infect the others. Since virgins were considered second only to the martyrs in dignity, Cyprian, in order to safeguard the moral integrity of the church, advocates a harsher penalty for their transgressions than for those committed by the laity: excommunication for continuation in secular customs.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *habitu*. 17 (CSEL 3.1:200.5-8): “sed tamquam contactas oues et morbidas pecudes a sancto et puro grege uirginitatis arceri, ne contagio suo ceteras pollutant, dum simul degunt, ne perdant alias quaecumque perierunt” (Trans. author). This notion of the failure in morality functioning as a contagion is again repeated in *lap*. 34 where Cyprian’s concern for expelling sinful members is with the contagion of imitation by others rather than an infectious disease transmitted through a contaminated Eucharist.

<sup>19</sup> Dunn argues that because the virgins were “the living embodiment of the nature of the Church in its purity” (“Infected Sheep and Diseased Cattle, or the Pure and Holy Flock: Cyprian’s Pastoral Care of Virgins,” *J ECS* 11, no. 1 (2003): 2), Cyprian held them to a higher standard of behavioral conformity. Given this and Cyprian’s claim that those virgins who continued to live sinfully had perished (*habitu*. 20), Dunn rightly concludes that the virgins lost not only their consecrated status but their status as Christians also.

The Carthaginian church, despite its cohesion through behavioral requirements and shared responsibility, was a shaky ecclesiological structure on the eve of the Decian persecution. Burns demonstrates that although the church formed a voluntary society theoretically separated from the secular culture, members were enmeshed in the Roman economy, and severe social and economic disparity existed among them.<sup>20</sup> As long as the church remained in common purpose under the agreed leadership of Cyprian, the community could remain defined on the local level with authority being shared by both the community and its bishop. Anything disrupting the identity of the community would necessarily force a shift in its ecclesiology.

## **2. The Decian Persecution**

In the early weeks of 250, Emperor Decius sought to secure the *pax deorum* and issued an edict requiring all inhabitants to sacrifice for the prosperity of the Roman Empire. The sacrifice itself required every free person and their household, whether committed personally or by a legal proxy, “to pour libations, make sacrifice, and taste the sacrificial victim,” and in some instances, the burning of incense was an acceptable alternative.<sup>21</sup> Although some scholars argue that Roman officials used tax records to implement the universal sacrifice, the evidence indicates that the actual enforcement of

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<sup>20</sup> On economic, social, and ecclesial disparity see Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop*, 12-7. See also Charles A. Bobertz, “Patronage Networks and the Study of Ancient Christianity,” *SP* 24 (1993): 20-1.

<sup>21</sup> This translation for the standard *libelli* formula comes from John R. Knipfing’s “The Libelli of the Decian Persecution,” *HTR* 16, no. 4 (1923): 345ff. Despite its age, Knipfing’s article remains to be the most complete treatment on this issue, with text and translations for forty-one certificates. For an excellent recent study, see J. B. Rives, “The Decree of Decius and the Religion of Empire,” *JRS* 89 (1999): 135-54.

the edict was inconsistent and under the judgment of local commissioners.<sup>22</sup> At Carthage, there was a commission of five individuals to enforce the sacrificial edict.<sup>23</sup> The sacrifice was conducted at the Forum where individuals were asked to sacrifice. For those who refused, the magistrate tried to persuade with threat of torture. If individuals remained recalcitrant, they were then incarcerated and awaited sentencing from the proconsul.<sup>24</sup> Not all Christians, however, had to face the choice whether to commit apostasy or suffer the consequences by local authorities. Often wealthy or prominent Christians were targeted, such as Fabian and Cyprian, as a means to get others to capitulate.<sup>25</sup>

The aim of the Roman government was not to make martyrs but to achieve social conformity through a shared ritual. The government, however, implemented coercive measures against Christians to achieve that end because of their recalcitrance toward sacrifice. In the first stage of the persecution (January to mid-March of 250), the consequence for refusing to sacrifice was exile (*relegatio*) often followed by loss of

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<sup>22</sup> See G. W. Clarke, "Some Observations on the Persecution of Decius," *Antichthon* 3 (1969): 70-3. See also Rives ("The Decree of Decius," 140-2) for a strong analysis of the debate surrounding the issuing and enforcement of the decree.

<sup>23</sup> *ep* 43.3.1. Here Cyprian links the five schismatic presbyters with the five commissioners (*primores*) by the magistrate to enforce Decius's edict.

<sup>24</sup> Again the procedure could vary. While Lucian in Carthage (*ep*. 10.2.1) went before a board of commissioners and bishop Martialis in Spain (*ep*. 67.6.2) went before a procurator, G. W. Clarke proposes that based on Cyprian's language Celerinus's second trial was before the emperor Decius, which was unusual, see Clarke, "Some Observations," 63-8. Sage points out that while the two-stage trial was the norm, occasionally it did not occur (*Cyprian*, 184). Concerning the African proconsul at the time, see G. W. Clarke, "Prosopographical Notes on the Epistles of Cyprian II. The Proconsul in Africa in 250 A.D.," *Latomus* 31 (4) (1972): 1053-57.

<sup>25</sup> This statement is not arguing as W. H. C. Frend did that Christian leaders were persecuted in the first phase (Dec. 249-Jan. 250) and the general populace in the second phase (May 250); see Frend, "Review: The Empire and the Christians," *Classical Review* 22, no. 3 (1972): 394, and for a more mitigated understanding, see *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 406. Clarke is correct that there was no distinction between phases, see "Two Measures in the Persecution of Decius: Two Recent Views," *Institute of Classical Studies* 20 (1973): 118-21. Nevertheless, the haphazard enactment of the edict would have resulted in a greater targeting of those who were more prominent socially and economically, and the consequences for refusal during the first stage were more detrimental to the wealthy. Cyprian's flight was justified because he was considered an *insignis persona* (*ep*. 8.1.1).



property (*confiscatio*).<sup>26</sup> This was an effective measure against wealthy Christians, many of whom immediately failed and made the sacrifice. Imprisonment and torture was introduced sometime prior to mid-April of 250 to persuade Christians to sacrifice; while some defiantly confessed the name of Christ, many more succumbed to the threat or experience of torture during either the first or second presentation before secular authorities.<sup>27</sup> At some point, supervisory officials issued certificates (*libelli*), perhaps to better monitor participation.<sup>28</sup> Many Christians viewed this as an opportunity to uphold the demands of the state as well as their baptismal oath to swear the name of Christ. Rather than actually making the sacrifice, some Christians bribed officials to obtain a certificate for themselves or others.<sup>29</sup>

The effect of the Decian persecution on the Carthaginian church and other Christian communities was devastating. No previous internal or external pressure had created a mass failure in upholding the discipline of the community. Large numbers of Christians were considered lapsed whether they or their legal proxy had sacrificed (*sacrificati*), offered incensed (*thurificati*), or had obtained a certificate (*certificati*).<sup>30</sup> To make matters worse many sees were vacated or substantially reduced in leadership. Some of the clergy suffered the penalties of the state (imprisonment, exile, or execution), some

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<sup>26</sup> G. W. Clarke, "Double-Trials in the Persecution of Decius," *Historia* 22 (4) (1973): 663.

<sup>27</sup> For the penalties see Clarke "Two Measures," 119-21 and Sage, *Cyprian*, 185-90.

<sup>28</sup> P. Keresztes, "The Decian Libelli and Contemporary Literature," *Latomus* 34 (1975):778.

<sup>29</sup> *ep.* 30.3.1; *lap.* 27.

<sup>30</sup> *ep.* 55.2.1, 13.2 (*thurificati* in the case of Trofimius). These distinctions are pronounced after the African Synod of 251. Prior to this Cyprian, while distinguishing between the *sacrificati* and *certificati*, perhaps because others are forcing this distinction, regards the actions as equally damning (*ep.* 30.3.1).

fled, and some simply lapsed.<sup>31</sup> Cyprian was absent from his community during the entire persecution in a self-imposed exile. Although his rationale was credible (i.e., to avoid bringing more attention to the community), he had to defend his actions from frequent criticism.<sup>32</sup> The absence of a bishop and an extreme failure in discipline placed the Carthaginian community in a precarious position concerning its current ecclesiology. Questions concerning the reconciliation of the lapsed and the maintenance of the community's purity dominated. Solutions to these questions were divisive for the community and challenged Cyprian's authority. Three groups in particular posed significant threats to his role as bishop: confessors/martyrs, laxists, and rigorists/Novatianists. I will discuss each of these groups and then three ways in which Cyprian creatively transformed his ecclesiology to maintain group cohesion and his authority in light of these challenges.

### ***Confessors/Martyrs***

Martyrs were especially revered in the early church. Not only did they perfectly imitate Christ and demonstrate the utmost fidelity through their death, but they were also believed to possess particular powers of intercession. Based on Revelation 6:9-11, it was commonly held that the martyrs immediately went to heaven and had direct, present contact with Christ. Even those who did not die but confessed Christ to the authorities and endured the consequent tortures were considered to have outwardly proven their fidelity to Christ and the community; as a result, they possessed an elevated status within

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<sup>31</sup> Many went to Rome, *ep.* 30.8.1.

<sup>32</sup> *epp.* 5.1, 6.1, 20.1. Dionysius of Alexandria, who also fled, shared the same experience (Eusebius, *HE* 6.40ff).

their church. A bishop could not expect to maintain his authority if he did not sustain good relations with the confessors.

It was a long-standing tradition in Christianity that a baptized person who had committed sins against God directly could not return to the community; penance was reserved for those sins that the community itself could forgive. However, as Cyprian indicates, another tradition existed, in which confessors recommended the reentry of the lapsed, even those who committed temporally unforgivable sins.<sup>33</sup> Given their scripturally promised status, the soon-to-be martyrs could forgive what the community believed it could not, and it seems that the confessors expected that their recommendations would readily be accepted and acted upon by the bishop. The Decian persecution in particular provided fertile ground for the proliferation of this practice because of the increased number of confessors who could potentially offer reconciliation and the lapsed who were in need of reconciliation. In Carthage, the confessors wrote many certificates (*libelli pacis*) recommending reentry into the community for those who had lapsed by obtaining certificates of sacrifice.

While many of the Carthaginian confessors remained deferential to Cyprian's penitential authority by first asking him whether or not peace could be granted to certain individuals whom they had judged to be in good character, some confessors presumptuously began to change the traditional practice.<sup>34</sup> In *Epistle 15*, Cyprian rebukes the confessors who drew up certificates that granted peace not only to the individual who sacrificed but also to his entire household. This for Cyprian created penitential chaos

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<sup>33</sup> *ep.* 15.4 suggests that the only innovation was the blanket certificates granting peace not only to an individual but to his entire household; as Cyprian states, it is this latter action that did not have precedence.

<sup>34</sup> *epp.* 15.2.2 and 27.1.1.

where anywhere from twenty to thirty individuals – relatives (*propinqui*), in-laws (*adfines*), freedmen (*liberti*), and slaves (*domestici*) – were gaining reentry without proper judgment before the community.<sup>35</sup> Worse yet, one confessor, Lucianus, had undercut the entire penitential system by distributing large numbers of blanket certificates to the lapsed under his own name and others.<sup>36</sup> Lucianus even wrote a curt letter to Cyprian under the name of all the confessors granting peace to everyone while impudently instructing him to inform the other bishops.<sup>37</sup> Lucianus’s actions further weakened Cyprian’s control by inciting the lapsed to demand immediate reconciliation and those already rebellious to reject the traditional discipline.

### ***Laxist Controversy***

The laxists argued in favor of the intercessory powers of the martyrs and readily readmitted the lapsed back into communion so long as they obtained a *libellus pacis*; thus, they dispensed with the proper mode of reconciliation (i.e., public confession and the laying on of hands by the bishop). The laxists were led by the very same presbyters who opposed Cyprian’s election.<sup>38</sup> Dissatisfied with Cyprian’s decision to defer the question of reconciliation until the persecution had ended and he could return, these presbyters ignored his disciplinary instructions. Rather than advising the confessors to be

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<sup>35</sup> *ep.* 15.4 (CCSL 3B:89.69).

<sup>36</sup> *epp.* 27.1.1-2 and 22.1.1-3.1.

<sup>37</sup> *ep.* 23. Allen Brent argues that Lucianus was appealing to a long-standing tradition in which through their confession they could claim ordination to the presbyterate, and thus reconciliation through offering of the Eucharist outside of the bishop (Brent, “Cyprian’s Reconstruction of the Martyr Tradition,” *JEH* 53, no. 2 (2002): 241-68).

<sup>38</sup> *ep.* 43.3.1.

prudent with their *libelli*, the laxist presbyters seemed to have encouraged the proliferation of *libelli*, using them to grant immediate reconciliation to the lapsed.<sup>39</sup>

Opposition between Cyprian and the laxists continued and intensified. However, the final break between them was not caused by the presbyters but by the deacon Felicissimus around March of 251.<sup>40</sup> Felicissimus first attempted to control the economic administration in the Carthaginian church and prevented Cyprian's associates from ascertaining and assisting the needy. Felicissimus then excommunicated anyone who remained in communion with Cyprian, and based on Matthew 18:20 ("Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, I am with them"), he set up an alternate church.<sup>41</sup> While much of the Carthaginian congregation and clergy remained under Cyprian's authority, a good number of confessors and laity immediately defected and joined with Felicissimus as well as the presbyters who previously gave Cyprian so many problems.<sup>42</sup>

Felicissimus continued to campaign for support among other disenfranchised Christians. He gained the support of Privatus, the former bishop of Lambaesis who had formed his own faction and elected Felix as the pseudo-bishop of the party.<sup>43</sup> After Privatus and his party of four bishops, who had been earlier deposed, were denied an audience by Cyprian and the synod of 252,<sup>44</sup> they elected Fortunatus as bishop in

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<sup>39</sup> *epp.* 15.1.2; 16.1.2-3.2; 17.2.1; 20.2.3; 34.2.1; 43.2.1-3.2.

<sup>40</sup> *ep.* 41.1.2. The presbyter Novatus had appointed Felicissimus as deacon while Cyprian was in exile (*ep.* 52.2).

<sup>41</sup> *unit.* 12.

<sup>42</sup> *epp.* 41, 42, and 43.

<sup>43</sup> *ep.* 59.10.1-2.

<sup>44</sup> Dunn correctly claims that the synod did not convene simply concerning the case of Privatus but was an already a scheduled synod "with a flexible agenda" (Dunn, "Cyprian and his *Collegae*," 4-5). It is entirely possible that these regular synods had somewhat of an open-floor policy.

opposition to Cyprian, and along with Felicissimus, sought support in Rome. Although Pope Cornelius did accept their letters after they threatened him, they were not able to garner Roman support where disciplinary rigorism held greater sway. As a result, the laxists remained largely a problem for North Africa and posed the most formidable threat to Cyprian and his authority as bishop.

### ***Rigorists/Novatianists***

Although not as prevalent as the laxists in North Africa, Cyprian also had to contend with the rigorists who obdurately clung to the traditional model of church discipline. The rigorists believed that anyone who had committed a sin against God could not be readmitted to the church because their sinfulness posed a real, corporeal threat to the purity of the community.<sup>45</sup> The rigorists feared that the lapsed brought not just moral infection to the community, as Cyprian had suggested, but they feared a physical contamination as well. For the rigorists, being in communion with the lapsed polluted the Eucharist, transforming it from a pure sacrament of life into a contagion of spiritual death. The rigorists believed that the disciplinary relaxation that occurred following the synod of 251 was unacceptable and threatened the purity of the entire church. As such, they refused communion with any church that accepted the lapsed back into communion.

The rigorist schism began in Rome after Cornelius was elected to the episcopate in March of 251.<sup>46</sup> The presbyter Novatian seemed to be the likely choice for bishop, as he was the leading presbyter in Rome and had a close relationship with Cyprian and his church. Under the influence of the ex-Carthaginian presbyter Novatus, Novatian garnered

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<sup>45</sup> Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop*, 52-6.

<sup>46</sup> For a thorough survey of the rigorist controversy, see Sage, *Cyprian*, 248-60.

support from three Italian bishops who consecrated him in opposition to Cornelius (around the beginning of April). Novatian then campaigned for universal support. He appealed to various bishops of prominent sees, attracted prominent Roman confessors to his movement, and placed competing bishops in most provinces and cities. By 252, there was a rigorist bishop, Maximin, who rivaled Cyprian for supporters in Carthage. Although Novatian was much more successful in creating a structured and universal schism than were the laxists, the rigorists did not seem to pose as great of an initial threat for Cyprian, given the predominance of laxist confessors and clerics in Carthage.<sup>47</sup>

### 3. Shifting Power: From Community to Bishop<sup>48</sup>

All three groups – confessors/martyrs, laxists, and rigorists/Novatianists – posed varying degrees of difficulty for Cyprian’s maintenance of authority and the unity of Carthaginian church. In response, he utilized internal and external strategies in order to reestablish cohesiveness of the community. Scholars, however, differ in their depictions of how Cyprian accomplished this. Burns argues that he shifted the social boundaries of

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<sup>47</sup> This is sufficiently demonstrated by Burns who argues that the first part of the baptismal controversy, which lasted from the spring of 255 (*cp.* 70, for dating see Dunn, “*Sententiam nostrum non novam promimus*: Cyprian and the Episcopal Synod of 255,” *AHC* 35 (2003): 214-17) until the spring of 256 (*cp.* 72) was dominated by concerns originating with the laxist schism (Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop*, 106-112). Dunn is reluctant to divide the controversy and argues for earlier references to Novatian (Dunn, “*Sententiam nostrum*,” nt. 19; *idem.* “Validity of Baptism and Ordination in the African Response to the ‘Rebaptism’ Crisis: Cyprian of Carthage’s Synod of Spring 256” *TS* 67 (2006): 261-62). Sage believes that after the summer of 252 (*cp.* 59) the laxist party was no longer a real threat to Cyprian and it was the rigorists to whom Cyprian shifts his attention (Sage, *Cyprian*, 264-65). This, however, would not explain why Cyprian and the other North African bishops immediately sought reconciliation of the lapsed with the threat of the Gallic persecution (*ep.* 51.1.2); such a significant relaxation of discipline can only be explained if the laxists were still a considerable threat.

<sup>48</sup> I am following Dunn (“Cyprian and his *Collegae*,” 8) and using a distinction set up by Joaquín Losada in his article “La colegialidad episcopal en san Cipriano,” in *Miscelánea Auriense en honor de Monseñor D. Angel Temiño Sáiz* (Orense: Diputación Provincial de Orense, 1985), 108-11. Here he argues that *potestas* was exercised by the individual as a personal quality vested in the person or office held, whereas *auctoritas* was exercised by the collective persons holding *potestas*.

the community to meet the needs affected by the Decian persecution.<sup>49</sup> Michael Sage focuses on his actions of constructing a secure powerbase.<sup>50</sup> Charles Bobertz, basing much of his work on Richard Saller's understanding of Roman patronage, argues that Cyprian utilized and enhanced his role as patron to quash the competing structures of patronage that developed following the Decian persecution.<sup>51</sup> Geoffrey D. Dunn carefully applies Bobertz's model to Cyprian's relationships with other bishops in North Africa and posits that Cyprian exercised some degree of patronage over other bishops, which further enhanced his ability to maintain unity among the African churches.<sup>52</sup> All of these theories, despite their different emphases, point to the fact that Cyprian unquestionably transformed his role as the bishop of Carthage in an attempt to repair the fractured North African churches.

The first step Cyprian took to reestablish his authority was to diminish the influence of the confessors and laity and locate the power of forgiveness primarily in the hands of the bishops. He reduced the intercessory powers of the martyrs by arguing that their status was contingent upon their own continued disciplinary rigor and that their power to intercede only applied to the final judgment of the lapsed not their temporal

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<sup>49</sup> Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop*, 67-77, 126-30. See also "The Role of Social Structures in Cyprian's Response to the Decian Persecution." *SP* 31 (1997): 260-267.

<sup>50</sup> Sage, *Cyprian*, 226.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Bobertz, *Cyprian of Carthage as Patron: A Social Historical Study of the Role of Bishop in the Ancient Christian Community of North Africa* (Ph. D. diss., Yale University, 1988): 130-75; "Patronage Networks," 20-7; "Patronal Letters of Commendation: Cyprian's *Epistulae* 38-40," *SP* 31 (1997): 252-9. See also Peter Brown, *The Making of Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 79.

<sup>52</sup> See Dunn, "Cyprian and his *collegae*," 8-11 and "Cyprian's Rival Bishops and Their Communities," *Augustinianum* 45 (1): 61-93. Dunn does not completely agree with all of Bobertz's arguments. See also "The White Crown of Works: Cyprian's Early Pastoral Ministry of Almsgiving in Carthage," *ChHist* 73, no. 4 (2004): 718-23 where Dunn challenges Bobertz's claim that Cyprian continued to act as a patron immediately after his conversion.



relationship to the community.<sup>53</sup> This simultaneously undercut the claims of both the confessors and the unruly lapsed whose foundational arguments rested upon the immediate power of the martyrs. Cyprian also placed reliable confessors in clerical positions outside the normal means of the election procedure. Although those he elevated were already recognized by the community, Cyprian did not consult the laity or clergy in their nomination but acted unilaterally. This is especially evident in *Epistle 38*. Here Cyprian explicitly admits that he is acting outside the customary procedures of conferring with the clergy prior to appointing a cleric when he appoints the confessor Aurelius to the position of reader.<sup>54</sup> In doing so, Cyprian enhanced his own power over the confessors and laity by acting as the sole nominator and arbitrator of clerical position, and he ensured local concord by placing well-respected confessors who properly submitted to his authority.

Moreover, Cyprian decreased the community's authority in regulating disciplinary procedures. While in exile, he repeatedly asserted that no permanent solution of the lapsed could be granted until the persecution ended and the bishops could safely

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<sup>53</sup> *lap.* 17-20. In *ep.* 57.4.2 (253, see Dunn, "Censuimus: Cyprian and the Episcopal Synod of 253," *Latomus* 63 (2004): 673-80), with the anticipated Gallic persecution, Cyprian argues against the notion that martyrs are baptized in their own blood and thus need not the peace of the bishop first. Cyprian asserts that the bishop's peace, which is equated with the peace of the Church, is needed in order to be a martyr. For Cyprian at this point, martyrs are not solely defined by their sacrificial action but principally by their association with the bishop/Church. See also *unit.* 14.

<sup>54</sup> *ep.* 38.1.2. Cyprian must also defend his choice given the youthfulness of Aurelius. In *ep.* 29 (late summer of 250), Cyprian tactfully defends his action of appointing the confessor Optatus to the position subdeacon by arguing that he was already tested by the community (1.2); however, this clearly was not formally done. By the early 251, Cyprian is less apologetic for his decisions of appointing the confessor Celerinus to the position of reader (*ep.* 39) and especially the confessor Numidicus to the position of presbyter (*ep.* 40). Although it is unclear whether the case of Numidicus was a clerical appointment or transfer (see G. W. Clarke, *The Letters of St. Cyprian, Vol. 2* (New York: Newman, 1984), 196). The only non-confessor that Cyprian appoints is Saturus (*ep.* 29).

convene a synod.<sup>55</sup> Once the synod convened in the spring of 251, it became a watershed moment in North African ecclesiology. As Dunn states, “One could speculate and say that the synod of 251 was not the first time Cyprian consulted with fellow bishops in communal gatherings and yet there is a sense that this gathering was like no other Cyprian had ever conducted.”<sup>56</sup> Although he had contacted bishops prior to garner support, this was the first time that he formed a synod in Carthage with a clear agenda to solve a problem among North African churches. Moreover, he did so with little reference to the laity. While Cyprian promised the laity a great deal of involvement in the letters preceding the synod, this does not seem to have been fulfilled.<sup>57</sup> Beginning with the synod of 251, formal lay involvement with disciplinary decisions was radically reduced, and it was consensus within the college of bishops that regulated disciplinary procedures in their churches. This severely undercut the demands made by the laxists who, given what seems to have been a substantial support base, claimed authority to make decisions concerning reconciliation of the lapsed.

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<sup>55</sup> The notion of a council as an exclusive episcopal assembly producing universally binding canons does not develop until the third century (see Hamilton Hess, *The Early Development of Canon Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 15-24; therefore, I am using the term synod given the regional applicability of the decisions made and the flexibility that bishops had to act contrary to conciliar decisions (*ep.* 72.3.1)

<sup>56</sup> Dunn, “The Carthaginian Synod of 251: Cyprian's Model of Pastoral Ministry,” *Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum* 78 (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2002): 256.

<sup>57</sup> Although some of the laity were present at the council and certainly impacted the deliberations (*ep.* 59.15.1), Dunn (“The Carthaginian Synod of 251,” 239-41 and 244-8) demonstrates through two points that the bishops had a dominant role in the council, which is somewhat at odds with what Cyprian wrote to his church previously (*epp.* 14.4, 17.3.2, 31.6.2): 1) as the council approached Cyprian sought less lay support and more support from the bishops, and 2) the bishops were able to keep a tight seal on information concerning the disputed elections at Rome, which could only occur if the debate was not well-attended by laity. While the laity still maintain a level of informal authority in defining their disciplinary boundaries, the synod of 251 marks then a significant shift in which the bishops formally decide as a collective authority.

The second step that Cyprian took was to shift the identity of the church from the local community to the bishop. Utilizing the commissioning of Peter (Mt 16:18), Cyprian argues that the bishop is the principal authority of the local church, since the powers to bind and loose were given to a single episcopal chair. Cyprian most clearly expounds his Petrine theory in the first edition of *On the Unity of the Catholic Church* where he asserts that, despite the shared power assigned to the Apostles, primacy was given to Peter to establish the singularity of the church.<sup>58</sup> Cyprian does not correlate the singularity of Peter's chair with the geographical-temporal holder of Peter's chair (i.e., Rome). Rather, Cyprian associates the singularity of each bishop as it concerns his own community. Just as primacy and authority was given to Peter, Cyprian argues the bishop of a community has a singular authority over his given flock.

Cyprian associated the adherence of the community to its bishop with the singularity of church. In *Epistle 43*, he again utilizes Matthew 16:18 against the laxists who by this point have clearly formed their own rival community:

God is one and Christ is one; there is one Church and one chair founded, by the Lord's authority, upon Peter. It is not possible that another altar can be set up, or that a new priesthood can be appointed, over and above this one altar and this one priesthood. Whoever gathers elsewhere, scatters. Whatever is so established by man in his madness that it violates what has been appointed by God is an obscene outrage, it is sacrilege.<sup>59</sup>

Each bishop in this sense represents the church, which is scripturally revealed for Cyprian in the singularity of its foundation upon Peter. He argues against the schismatics that

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<sup>58</sup> *unit.* 4.

<sup>59</sup> *ep.* 43.5.2 (CCSL 3B:205.89-94): "Deus unus est et Christus unus et una ecclesia et cathedra una super Petrum domini uoce fundata. Aliud altare constitui aut sacerdotium nouum fieri praeter unum altare et unum sacerdotium non potest. Quisque alibi collegerit spargit. Adulterum est, impium est, sacrilegum est quodcumque humano furore instituitur ut dispositio diuina uioletur" (Trans. Clarke, *Letters* 2, 64).

alienation from their bishop was alienation from the church and its life-giving resources, an action tantamount to apostasy.

Cyprian repeats this notion in *Epistle 66* when the confessor Puppianus contested his worthiness as a bishop (ca. 254).<sup>60</sup> Against Puppianus, Cyprian argues that schisms and heresies arise when members of the community stand against the bishop whom God appoints as the leader of the church.<sup>61</sup> In reference to Matthew 16:18, Cyprian, later in the epistle, asserts that anyone who is not with the bishop cannot be in the church, since the two are inseparable from one another.<sup>62</sup> He links the identity of the local ecclesial body and the bishop. While the community was still involved with the episcopal election, and in this sense had some say in who was identified with the ecclesial body, his statement suggests they were beginning to function more as an instrument within the church, whereas the bishop was beginning to function personally *as* the church.

Cyprian was careful, however, not to create a system in which the bishop had complete monarchic power over the local community. Although he was the leader and held singular authority over the community, the bishop was nevertheless bound to the standards of the community. Just as the church was believed to be pure, the bishop as its representative was also expected to be pure. If a bishop was found to be unworthy, whether because he had lapsed or committed some other public crime, Cyprian expected the community to utilize its power and remove him from clerical status. Such was the case with the community at Assuras where the bishop Fortunatianus had lapsed

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<sup>60</sup> For the dating of this epistle, see Clarke, *Letters 3*, 321-2.

<sup>61</sup> *ep.* 65.5.1. Geoffrey D. Dunn demonstrates that Cyprian did not perceive a sharp distinction between heresy and schism, which prevented him from acknowledging sacramental validity in baptisms performed by schismatic clerics; "Heresy and Schism According to Cyprian of Carthage," *JTS* 55 (2) (2004): 551-74.

<sup>62</sup> *ep.* 66.8.3.

(*sacrificati*) during the Decian persecution and was trying to reclaim his see. Using various scriptural injunctions from Exodus (19:22, 22:20, 30:20ff), Leviticus (21:17), Isaiah (2:8ff, 57:6) and Revelation (14:9), Cyprian exhorts the community, in *Epistle 65*, to separate itself from Fortunatianus not only because he became a bad model for the community but also because he lost the Holy Spirit and could morally pollute the Eucharist through the community's acceptance of him. Because he equates support of the local bishop with the unity of the church, a community that supports an unworthy bishop acquiesces to his sin and thus becomes collectively impure. Even though Cyprian enhanced the authority of the local bishop by identifying him with the church, he in turn further restricted the bishop by placing greater disciplinary responsibility on the bishop as the representation of his church's purity; moreover, a bishop was still subject to the community, which was morally obligated to remove him if found to be unworthy.

#### **4. Shifting Authority and Purity: From Local Bishop to a Universal Episcopate**

Cyprian's move to locate ecclesial power and authority in the local bishop greatly assisted in rebuilding the cohesiveness of the Carthaginian community and reestablished the boundaries of the church; those who were under a worthy bishop were guaranteed access to the life-giving powers of the Holy Spirit, and thus, members of the true church. Such an ecclesiological understanding proved only to be a temporary solution for Cyprian. As the schismatic groups continued to grow and organize into competing churches with their own bishops, the local bishop no longer functioned as a clear sign of unity. In combating the challenges left in the wake of the Decian persecution, Cyprian

began to develop his local understanding of the church into a universal one represented by the college of bishops.

Between 251 and 255, he practically enacted rather than theoretically explicated this development; while he advanced various arguments concerning the unity of the church, such as the indivisibility of Christ's tunic, they were always in reference to unity of the local community with its bishops.<sup>63</sup> The widespread problem of the lapsed and schismatics, however, required a large-scale collaborative effort on the part of the North African bishops. Cyprian, more than any other preceding bishop, utilized and developed formal synods in order to create common action and consensus among North African bishops.<sup>64</sup> Under Cyprian, seven synods met in Carthage.<sup>65</sup> The synods became for him a standard upon which unity could be judged. Although a bishop was theoretically considered autonomous in regard to his individual power and was even tolerated when acting against the formal episcopal consensus, reproach and disciplinary threats from other bishops occurred when there was dissention on certain matters, especially those

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<sup>63</sup> *unit. 7*. See Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop*, 95.

<sup>64</sup> Tertullian makes reference to ecclesial synods in *Pud.* 10.12; however, Hess in *Early Developments of Canon Law* rightly states, "Tertullian's phraseology leaves the distinction between intra- and inter-ecclesial gatherings in ambiguity" (15). The first clearly inter-ecclesial synod in North Africa was held under Agrippinus (*epp.* 71.4.1 and 73.3.1; Augustine, *bapt.* 13.22). The only other inter-ecclesial synod was under Cyprian's predecessor, Donatus, where Privatus, the bishop of Lambaesis, was condemned ca. 240 (*epp.* 36.4.1 and 59.10.1). For the procedure of Cyprian's synods, see Philip R. Amidon's "The Procedure of St. Cyprian's Synods," *VigChr* 37, no. 4 (1983): 328-339.

<sup>65</sup> I am following Geoffrey D. Dunn's convincing series of studies with regard to the date of the councils and the epistles that describe those councils: Spring Synod of 251 = *ep.* 55 ("The Carthaginian Synod of 251," 242-6); Spring Synod of 252 = *epp.* 59 and 64 ("Cyprian and his *Collegae*," 4-6); Spring Synod of 253 = *ep.* 57 ("*Censuimus*," 673-77); Autumn Synod of 254 = *ep.* 67 ("Cyprian of Carthage and the Episcopal Synod of Late 254," *REAug* 48 (2002): 230-7); Spring Synod of 255 = *ep.* 70 ("*Sententiam nostrum*," 214-5); Spring Synod of 256 = *ep.* 72 ("Validity of Baptism and Ordination," 257-8); Autumn Synod of 256 = *sent.*

concerning common penitential practices.<sup>66</sup> Even Cyprian, despite his authority and prestige, did not unilaterally proceed outside the college of bishops and postponed disciplinary decisions until collective arbitration occurred.<sup>67</sup>

Cyprian explicitly began to associate the church itself with the college of bishops in early 255 and continued to develop the notion through 256.<sup>68</sup> There were two precipitating factors for this change, both involving Stephen, the bishop of Rome: 1) Marcianus's adoption of rigorist theology, and 2) the rebaptism controversy. Through these two events coupled with the already well-established synodal procedure in North Africa, Cyprian overtly extended his notion of unity from a community's association with their local bishop to a bishop's association with the world-wide episcopal college, thus conceiving of the church as a universal structure reflected by but abstracted from the local community. Subsequently, Cyprian changed his notion of the church's purity from a more tangible, local notion to a more abstract, universal understanding located principally in the college of bishops.

Various bishops in Gaul wrote to Cyprian concerning Marcianus, the bishop of Arles, who had begun to adopt a rigorist stance towards the penitents, even denying

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<sup>66</sup> *ep.* 64.1.1ff. Here the bishop, Therapius, reconciled the lapsed presbyter, Victor, contrary to what the bishops had decided in 251; with no urgent reason, such as death, or some other necessary reason, Victor was reconciled without having fully completed his penance, and Therapius never petitioned the laity. The bishops at the synod of 252, however, allowed the reconciliation but reprimanded Therapius for relaxing disciplinary standards.

<sup>67</sup> *ep.* 56.3. Five bishops wrote Cyprian asking his advice on a penitential matter. Three individuals confessed the name of Christ but subsequently failed during their torture. Given these circumstances and the fact that they had performed three years of penance, they inquire if they can be reconciled before death despite their apostasy. While Cyprian believes that granting them reconciliation is allowable, he admits this is only his personal judgment and cannot provide a firm decision until the next scheduled synod convenes and the bishops can discuss this issue, which is contrary to the previous decision.

<sup>68</sup> This is not to say that he does not make any association before these events. *ep.* 59.5.2. (ca. 252), for instance, Cyprian discusses how arrogant schismatics act against both their bishop and the college of bishops. However, Cyprian's association of the college of bishops with the Church is not as highly developed nor does stand as the central argument as it will be in 255-256.

reconciliation to the penitent lapsed on their deathbed. The bishop of Gaul, Faustinus, approached both Cyprian and Stephen, presumably to back the provincial bishops' decision to excommunicate Marcianus for adopting a now universally declared, improper disciplinary practice. For his part, Cyprian gave full support for the expulsion of Marcianus. Stephen, however, had not responded to the Gallic bishops' multiple petitions.

Sometime early in 255, Cyprian wrote to Stephen in order to persuade him to assist the Gallic churches by urging the community at Arles to declare Marcianus excommunicate and appoint a successor. In *Epistle 68*, Cyprian advances an argument that he had not yet so forcefully applied to schismatics. He argues that Marcianus had broken with the college of bishops.<sup>69</sup> Cyprian here is not simply speaking of the North African bishops. Repeatedly throughout this letter, he inclusively refers to himself, Stephen, and the Gallic bishops as part of a collective unity and contends that Marcianus's major crime was his rejection of the college of bishops. According to Cyprian, this college is bound by both mutual concord and unity, qualities he once attributed to the local community; anyone fissuring this bond is to be considered outside of the college of bishops, expelled from his flock, and excluded by other bishops.<sup>70</sup> In contrast to *Epistle 66* (written a year earlier), where Cyprian identifies the church with the bishop and heresy/schism with discord against the local bishop, here he identifies heresy/schism with discord against the collective unity of bishops, thereby identifying the church with the college itself. Thus, Cyprian in his exhortation to Stephen concerning

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<sup>69</sup> *ep.* 68.4.3.

<sup>70</sup> *ep.* 68.3.2.



Marcianus explicates his notion of a universal college of bishops, which previously had only been alluded to in his promotion of and participation in regional conciliarism.

Cyprian's controversy with Stephen over the efficacy of baptisms performed in schismatic communities in 256 solidified his already explicit notion of the college of bishops formed by 255. The synod of 256 decided that rebaptism of converted schismatics not baptized in the Catholic Church was an appropriate measure. While rebaptism of converts from heretical communities had been theologically proposed by Tertullian ca. 206 and formally approved under Agrippinus ca. 230,<sup>71</sup> the synod of 256 seems to have extended this sacramental practice to include schismatics, no doubt because of a large influx of converts already baptized in the rigorist communities.<sup>72</sup>

Although the seventy-one bishops present in North Africa unanimously agreed upon this decision, Stephen insisted that the imposition of hands was sufficient and rebaptism was contrary to ecclesial tradition. To impose his position, Stephen went so far as to deny an envoy of North African bishops lodging and communion.<sup>73</sup>

Cyprian employed his recently formed notion of the college of bishops against Stephen and his attempt to force a Roman tradition upon the North African bishops. As Burns demonstrates, he expands his Petrine theory of episcopal authority by interpreting Matthew 16:18 in light of John 20:22-3 and argues that the power to bind and loose sins

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<sup>71</sup> Tert., *Bapt.* 15.2 and *Pud.* 19.5. The date of Agrippinus's synod is widely debated. Rankin believes it occurred in 217, which has been the commonly accepted date (*Tertullian and the Church*, 14 nt. 27). However, Clarke provides a compelling argument to suggest this council had occurred later (*Letters 4*, 197-8).

<sup>72</sup> See Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop*, 101. Burns I think correctly theorizes that given the rigorists' position on penance and church membership that they would have enforced the full preparatory time for catechumens, which would have been four years. Since the first rigorist bishop was in place in 251, the earliest rigorist converts baptized in those churches would have occurred at the earliest in 255.

<sup>73</sup> *ep.* 25.1. Stephen also broke communion with several bishops of Asia Minor for the same reason (*HE* 7.5.3ff).

was given to the apostles as a whole.<sup>74</sup> Such a move not only legitimized the conciliarism already present in North Africa but also prevented Stephen from unilaterally demanding uniformity against a large number of bishops. In his final revision of *On the Unity*, Cyprian states, “No doubt the other Apostles were all that Peter was, endowed with equal dignity and power.”<sup>75</sup> And again in the minutes from the synod of eighty-seven bishops in 256, Cyprian states,

Neither do any of us set himself up as a bishop of bishops, nor by tyrannical terror does any compel his colleague to the necessity of obedience; since every bishop, according to the allowance of his liberty and power, has his own proper right of judgment.<sup>76</sup>

Against Stephen, he argues that the authority of the bishops is not bound in a single person but in the negotiation and collaboration of the collection of bishops who together form the singularity of the one, true church. Their unity, Cyprian argues, is the oneness that Paul articulates concerning the Body of Christ in Ephesians 4:4-6; the unity of the episcopal college is the unity of the church.

The rebaptism controversy with Stephen caused Cyprian to heighten and nuance his understanding of the church’s purity. The shared sense of purity was an important component in the identity of the early church, especially in Carthage. Cyprian simply could not abandon the claim of ecclesial purity, as both tradition and Scripture prevented this. Nevertheless, the former model of the local church functioning as a pure community was no longer tenable, since the African churches repeatedly relaxed prior disciplinary

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<sup>74</sup> Burns, *Cyprian the Bishop*, 159-62.

<sup>75</sup> *unit.* 4 (CCSL 3:251.92-95): “Hoc erant utique et ceteri apostoli quod fuit Petrus, pari consortio praediti et honoris et potestatis” (Trans. Bevenot, *Lapsed and Unity*, 46).

<sup>76</sup> *sent. pref.* (CCSL 3E:7.21-25): “neque enim quisquam nostrum episcopum se episcoporum constituit aut tyrannico terrore ad obsequendi necessitatem collegas suos adigit, quando habeat omnis episcopus pro licentia libertatis et potestatis suae arbitrium proprium tamque iudicari ab alio non possit” (Trans. author).

regulations. The synod of 251, while requiring *sacrificati* to remain penitent until their deathbed, allowed the *certificati* into communion after a prescribed penitential period, although both were considered lapsed.<sup>77</sup> Moreover, the synod of 253 immediately reconciled all penitents without distinction as the threat of another persecution arose.<sup>78</sup> While such actions certainly eroded the laxist position, they only provided more fodder for the rigorists who claimed to possess purity exclusively. To combat both laxists and rigorists, Cyprian shifted the boundaries of purity from principally residing in the local community to the universal college of bishops.

Prior to the Decian persecution, the local community itself was perceived to be a pure society over against the secular, polluted world; thus, there was a distinct separation between Christian (pure) and non-Christian (impure). With the failure of discipline and the creation of schismatic groups, Cyprian transferred his arguments concerning the secular world and applied them to schismatic groups. He argued that the distinction was between inside and outside the church, a linguistically subtle but ecclesiologically significant shift. Regardless of their claim concerning Christ, the schismatic rituals were equated with Roman sacrifice, a polluted contagion that needed to be avoided.<sup>79</sup> Only the

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<sup>77</sup> *ep.* 55.13.1. In this letter, Cyprian addresses the bishop Antonianus who is strongly considering the rigorists' position and seems to perceive Cyprian as having lost his disciplinary zeal. Cyprian does view the council as a *salubrem moderationem* (CCSL 3B:263) and did up unto the council slowly mitigate his original stance, which was no reconciliation until the council (*ep.* 8.6.3). See also *epp.* 18.1.2, 19.2.1, 20.3.1, and 30.8.

<sup>78</sup> *ep.* 57.1.2.

<sup>79</sup> Burns, in *Cyprian the Bishop*, states, "Although the laxist communion, which is here identified as the focus on the first stage of the controversy over rebaptism, contained at least three sacrificers among its bishops, Cyprian and his colleagues did not rely on this defect as the basis for their arguments. Instead, they charged that the rituals of their opponents were sacrilegious and contaminating because they were performed in rebellion against the unity of the church" (146-7). While I certainly agree with Burns that Cyprian began to associate the laxists with sacrilege and rituals performed by unworthy ministers with contamination (*epp.* 43.3.1; 65.2.2ff; 67.3.1-2; *lap.* 17), I argue that Cyprian does not explicitly connect schismatic rituals with idolatry, and certainly not with the same vigor, until he deals with the rigorists.

true church actually possessed purity. While an argument from purity probably did little to persuade laxists, since they believed their failings were resolved by the martyrs, it did provide Cyprian with an argument sharpening the distinction between the two groups.

Cyprian also had to discern exactly how the church was pure. This was not necessary against the laxists as it was against the rigorists who claimed to be the only church whose communion was not polluted by association with the lapsed. Although Cyprian could weaken the rigorists' claims by citing their continued communion with known sinners, this could not rebuff the rigorists' charge that the Catholic Church was polluted through its relaxation of penitential discipline. He accuses them of setting up a profane altar, referencing the rebellion against Aaron's priesthood as a scriptural precedent for the futility and danger of creating a second altar, one which can affect both laity and clergy.<sup>80</sup> Any person who received baptism outside of the church/college of bishops was not only unclean but further polluted by the ritual.<sup>81</sup> Only the one, true church is pure and possesses the Holy Spirit and thereby the generative cleansing necessary for salvation. Thus, Cyprian argues that anyone who was baptized by a schismatic bishop and comes over to the Catholic Church has to be baptized in the one, truly pure church.

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Burns rests his argument on his preceding claim that the first part of the rebaptism controversy was focused on the laxists, where the bulk of his evidence comes from (*epp.* 70.1.3, 2.2-3; 72.1.1, 2.1-2). While Burns demonstrates aptly that Cyprian was primarily concerned with the laxists in the first part of the controversy, his distinction is too sharp and excludes the possibility that Cyprian has the rigorists in mind during the first part of this polemic, which I think is clearly the case since he was dealing with the rigorists arguments of purity previously (*ep.* 66). An argument resting on purity has no real force against a group that readily reconciled grievous sins, such an argument only has affect against a group claiming ritual purity, namely the rigorists.

<sup>80</sup> *epp.* 69.8.1, 9.1-2; 73.8.1.

<sup>81</sup> *epp.* 69.9.1-2. Not only was Novatian considered to be devoid of the Holy Spirit, but Cyprian also in *ep.* 69.1.3 designates him as one of the antichrists in 1 John 2:18ff.

## 5. Conclusion

The Decian persecution created a massive ecclesiological issue for Cyprian. The community that had once been unified by its purity had fractured and competing claims of authority arose. Cyprian maintained the majority of the Carthaginian church but only by changing various elements of its ecclesiology. To combat the competing claims of the laxists and rigorists, he placed more authority in the episcopacy whose unity and purity became synonymous with the unity and purity of the church. The universal college of bishops therefore replaced the bond of faith once associated with the local community. Rather than the local community's adherence to its disciplinary standards as the sign of the church, it was their fidelity to their bishop who in turn collaborated and negotiated with the worldwide association of bishops that guaranteed the presence of the Holy Spirit. At the end of his career, Cyprian located the identity of the church in the episcopal collective. While his ecclesiology still embraced the church *super terram*, it became more abstracted and less socially visible, a move which allowed him to effectively combat both the laxist and rigorist schisms.

### **Mater Ecclesia: Metaphor and Scriptural Types in Cyprian's Works**

*Mater ecclesia*, and its related phrase *matrix ecclesia*, functioned as one of Cyprian's central analogies for his ecclesial understanding and appeared in his works most often during turbulent polemical activity. Following the prior scholarship of Plumpe and Delahaye, I will present Cyprian's uses of the metaphor in chronological order and group them according to the major ecclesial events that he faced during his episcopate.

The present analysis, however, departs from previous studies in two ways. First, this study will demonstrate that Cyprian's use of *mater ecclesia* was not static throughout his career. Plumpe in his landmark study claims that whenever he uses *mater* to refer to the church, he unequivocally does so in reference to the universal church not the one in Carthage.<sup>82</sup> By taking the transformation of Cyprian's ecclesiology into account and changing the specific order of his metaphorical uses by correctly dating particular treatises, I will demonstrate that his metaphor changes and parallels those he made concerning his notion of the church. In contrast to Plumpe, I argue that Cyprian's earlier uses of *mater ecclesia* are exclusively applied to the local church and only later become associated with the universal church. Second, this study will challenge the general scholarly perception that North Africans were not speculative concerning their notion of *mater ecclesia*. Such misapprehension is best exemplified by Plumpe:

Thus, we may well say that in the writings of St. Cyprian Africa appears as the classical land of the true Mater Ecclesia. For Cyprian she is not a mother of theory or speculation, she has very little in common with the Scriptural—allegorical [Mater Ecclesia] of his Alexandrian contemporary, Origen, nor does he favor the mystical Virgin Spouse and Mother which the accomplished artist and theologian, Methodius, was to represent. To the practical and ever busy bishop and pastor it is of no practical consequence that traditionally the Church was a virgin and queen.<sup>83</sup>

I will demonstrate that, while Cyprian's early use of *mater ecclesia* is more terrestrial insofar as he associates the maternity of church with the local Christian community, his later understanding becomes more abstract when he connects *mater ecclesia* with the universal college of bishops.

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<sup>82</sup> Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia*, 95.

<sup>83</sup> Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia*, 104.

## 1. The Community as Mother: 248-250

Cyprian first uses the maternal metaphor in *On the Dress of Virgins*, his first treatise as a bishop (ca. 249). Concerning the effect virgins have on the church, he states, “The glorious fruitfulness of Mother Church rejoices because of them and blooms abundantly in them, and the more bountiful in virginity is added to her number, the more it makes the praise of the mother grow.”<sup>84</sup> For Cyprian, the actions of the virgins directly impact the church itself. He perceives the church not as something distinct from the activities of its members but as a reflection of them. He believes that their acceptance of virginity positively impacts the fecundity of the church.

Conversely, when some of the virgins began to visit the baths and wear immodest clothing, Cyprian explains that their lack of discipline negatively reflects on not only themselves but also the church: “Thus the flower of her virgins is extinguished, the honor and decency of her temperance is wounded, and all the glory and esteem is desecrated.”<sup>85</sup> Not only is the response of the mother presented as bound to the actions of her children, but her integrity is as well. Thus, Cyprian perceives the integrity of the church to be predicated on the purity of its members. For Cyprian, any member who does not embrace the community’s discipline should be expelled to preserve its collective purity and the presence of the Holy Spirit.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> *habitu*. 3 (CSEL 3.1:189.15-18): “Gaudet per illas adque in illis largiter floret ecclesiae matris gloriosa fecunditas, quanto que plus copiosa uirginitas numero suo addit, gaudium matris augetur” (Trans. author).

<sup>85</sup> *habitu*. 20 (CSEL 3.1:201.16-18): “sic flos uirginum extinguitur, honor continentiae ac pudor caeditur, gloria omnis ac dignitas profanatur” (Trans. author).

<sup>86</sup> *habitu* 2. Since Cyprian here at this point believes that there is no further pardon for sins committed after baptism, this would also suggest that the recalcitrant virgins were excommunicated rather than simply removed from the registry of virgins.

Cyprian continues to utilize this notion of the mother's passive reflectivity early on in the Decian persecution when he turns his attention to the confessors and the lapsed. In *Epistle* 10 (mid/late April 250), Cyprian congratulates the confessors and exhorts them to persevere despite increased pressure from local authorities. Concerning the perseverance and achievement of those martyred, Cyprian states,

I am overwhelmed with joy and gladness, my brothers most brave and most blessed, for I have learned of your faith and fortitude. In these virtues our Mother the Church takes great pride—just as she indeed took pride recently when those who remained resolute in their confession incurred the punishment which drove the confessors of Christ into exile.<sup>87</sup>

As with the virgins, the status of the mother is reflected by the confessors, and their virtue is equated with her joy. This is again demonstrated in *Epistle* 10 where he states, “Amongst her bosom she lacks neither the lily nor the rose.”<sup>88</sup> The mother's integrity is maintained by her children whether through their works (the lily) or martyrdom (the rose).

Cyprian also believes that the mother is conversely affected by the confessional failures of her children. Concerning the lapsed, he informs the community that he prays so that

“As our Mother the Church bewails the downfall and the death of very many, by your joy you may dry her tears, and by the challenge of your

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<sup>87</sup> *ep.* 10.1.1 (CCSL 3B:46.5-8): “Exulto laetus et gratulor, fortissimi ac beatissimi fratres, cognita fide et uirtute uestra, in quibus mater ecclesia gloriatur, gloriata et nuper quidem cum confessione perstanti suscepta poena est quae confessores Christi fecit extorres” (Trans. Clarke, *Letters 1*, 71). Clarke tentatively suggests that the phrase “*fides et uirtus*,” which occurs three times in this epistle (see also 10.1.2 and 10.4.1), may be an allusion to the mother of 2 Maccabees 6:31ff, since the phrase again appears in *ep.* 58.6.1 where Cyprian explicitly uses this phrase in association with the sons and their mother of 2 Maccabees (Clarke, *Letters 1*, 229-30, nt. 3).

<sup>88</sup> *ep.* 10.5.2 (CCSL 3B:55.113): “Floribus eius nec lilia nec rosae desunt” (Trans. Clarke, *Letters 1*, 75).



example you may confirm the resolution of the rest who remain standing.<sup>89</sup>

The mother is equally pained by the failure (*ruinas et funera*) of her children who have lapsed and subsequently lost the life-giving rewards of the Church through their public denial of Christ. For Cyprian, her reaction can only be quelled by a balance of discipline, and the confessors need to remain steadfast in their commitment in order to serve as a model of discipline for those members not yet tested.

Cyprian's earliest attempt at providing a feminine type for the church corresponds with his metaphorical understanding of mother. In the first book of his *Testimonies*, Cyprian uses three female figures to demonstrate that Christians have succeeded the place of Jews in the history of God's promise. Using Isaiah 54:1-4, where Israel is personified as a barren female figure, he argues that the church, which had been barren, is now becoming fruitful as prophesied. He then compares the Christian church with those women who were barren but then produced:

Thus also to Abraham, when his former son had been born from a slave-girl, Sarah remained barren for a long time and from a promise late in her old age she bore a son Isaac, who was a type of Christ. Thus also Jacob took two wives: Leah, the older one with weak eyes, was a type of the synagogue; Rachel, the younger beautiful one, was a type for the Church, who also remained barren for a long time and afterwards bore Joseph, who was also himself a type of Christ. Also in 1 Kings, Elkanah had two wives: Peninnah with her sons and Hannah who was barren from whom Samuel was born....Samuel was a type of Christ.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> *ep.* 10.4.4 (CCSL 3B:53.90-93): "ut lacrimas matris ecclesiae quae plangit ruinas et funera plurimorum uos uestra laetitia tergeatis et ceterorum quoque stantium firmitatem uestri exempli prouocatione solidetis" (Trans. Clarke, *Letters 1*, 74).

<sup>90</sup> *test.* 1.20 (CCSL 3:20.12-20, 22). "Sic et abraham cum de ancilla natus esset prior filius, sarra sterilis diu mansit et sero in senecta de pollicitatione peperit filium isaac, qui fuit typus christi. Sic et iacob accepit uxores duas, maiorem liam oculis infirmioribus typum synagogae, minorem speciosam rachel typum ecclesiae, quae et sterilis diu mansit et postea peperit ioseph, qui et ipse fuit typus christi. Et in basilion i helcana habet uxores duas, fenannam cum filiis et annam sterilem, ex qua nascitur samuhel...et natus samuhel typus fuit christi" (Trans. author).

All three women (Sara, Rachel, and Hannah) function for Cyprian as a type of the church with their sons as a type of Christ coming from the barren womb. Hannah in particular serves as a type of the church; with the Song of Hannah (2 Sam 2:1-10), he compares the seven sons born to the seven churches in Paul and Revelation (*test.* 1.20). Cyprian again turns to Hannah as a typological figure when he dealt with lapsed members following the Decian persecution.

Although Cyprian's early metaphorical and typological uses of Old Testament mothers are much less frequent than during his polemical activity with schismatics, these instances suggest three observations. First, the association of mother and church was firmly rooted in North Africa by this time. Cyprian never feels the need to demonstrate scripturally the applicability of this ecclesial title and utilizes it throughout his entire episcopacy. Second, his notion of *mater ecclesia* during this period functions merely as a reflection of her children. While fecund and not at all associated with virginal imagery, he provides the mother with an extremely passive role being emotionally reactive to the actions of the community. Just as Cyprian at this time views the church as distinct from the local community, he also does not understand the mother as detached from the members of the Carthaginian church.

Third, if the *Testimonies* is attributable to Cyprian and not merely an inherited compendium of Scripture, then his notion of *mater ecclesia* is scripturally rooted, despite the claims of prior scholarship. While it may lack the floridly allegorical exegesis of Origen, Cyprian is clearly aware of and utilizes scriptural typology for the church's maternal aspect. In his *Testimonies*, moreover, he indirectly and offhandedly associates Mary with the church, a very rare occurrence in early patristic literature and an anomaly

in his own corpus. By making Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah figures of the church and their sons figures of Christ, it would not take a large associative leap to link Mary, the historical mother of Christ, with the church itself, the Body of Christ. While it is doubtful that Cyprian intended such an implication, since elsewhere he never draws any association between Mary and the church, this passage, nevertheless, does point toward the future link between the two.

## 2. The Bishop as Mother: 250-255

As more Carthaginian Christians lapsed during the Decian persecution, especially after the government's inclusion of physically coercive measures, the tenor of Cyprian's letters change as does his image of *mater ecclesia*. In a group of epistles dated to mid-May of 250 (*epp.* 15, 16, and 17), Cyprian describes how some of the confessors and presbyters began to relax the customary disciplinary procedures in his absence.

Concerning those seeking the *libelli martyrum*, he advises the confessors,

They should keep your petitions and requests for the bishop, awaiting the seasonable time (when peace has been restored) for granting the peace which you request. The mother needs first to receive peace from the Lord and then the question of peace for her sons can be considered, in the way that you desire.<sup>91</sup>

Here the condition of the mother is not simply reflective of but privileged over the laity. Cyprian associates the mother's peace directly with the return of the bishop, suggesting an identification of the local church with its bishop. He repeats this idea in *Epistle 16*, where he reprimands his presbyters for taking penitential matters into their own hands

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<sup>91</sup> *ep.* 15.2.2 (CCSL 3B:87.38-41): "Petitiones et desideria uestra episcopo seruent, ad pacem uobis potentibus dandam maturum et pacatum tempus expectent. Ante est ut a domino pacem mater prior sumat, tunc secundum uestra desideria de filiorum pace tractetur" (Trans. Clarke, *Letters I*, 91).

and asserts that no decision concerning the mother's children can be reached until the persecution calms and all are back in their mother's comforting bosom (*in sinum matris ecclesiae*).<sup>92</sup>

For almost an entire year, Cyprian made no mention of *mater ecclesia*. However, he continuously employs the metaphor once he begins his polemic against the schismatics in 251. In *Epistle* 41, he writes to two nearby bishops and his remaining presbyters concerning a new ecclesial problem in Carthage: Felicissimus and his faction severed communion with Cyprian's church. Cyprian congratulates those remaining with him saying,

I am indeed delighted that a large number of the brethren have in fact withdrawn from his seditious schemes and have preferred to be in accord with you, remaining thereby with the Church, their mother, and enjoying her emoluments from the hands of the bishop who dispenses them.<sup>93</sup>

Even more strongly than in *Epistles* 15-17, Cyprian associates the mother figure with the episcopacy: the mother's nourishment is only possible for a person in communion with a properly ordained bishop. The nourishment, in this case, is the common funds from which he dispensed alms for the needy and payment for the clergy, against which

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<sup>92</sup>*ep.* 16.4.2 (CCSL 3B:95.75). *Sinus* often conveys a notion of protective comfort to the recipient; see for instance Pliny *ep.* 8.16.5. See also *ep.* 16.3.2 and *ep.* 43.6.2; in the latter, Cyprian applies this notion to the various factions that have resulted from the Decian persecution, which had recently ended.

<sup>93</sup> *ep.* 41.2.1 (CCSL 3B:197.28-31): "in quo quidem gratulor plurimos fratres ab eius audacia recessisse et uobis adquiescere maluisse, ut cum ecclesia matre remaneret et stipendia eius episcopo dispensante perciperent" (Trans. Clarke, *Letters* 2, 60). Clarke argues that Cyprian is using the term *stipendia* in a general sense rather than referring to clerical payments (Clarke, *Letters* 2, 207 nt. 9). Nevertheless, Clarke translates the word as emoluments, which suggests the exclusive conveyance of the word and betrays Clarke's own argument. *Stipendia* typically refers to a payment received for a service rendered, most commonly in the military. Because it is unclear to whom Cyprian is referring when he uses the phrase *plurimi fratres*, there are three possible ways of understanding what Cyprian means concerning the *stipendia* received from *mater ecclesia*: 1) Cyprian is talking about the clerics exclusively here and is thus referring to their payment in which case emolument would be a proper translation; 2) Cyprian is simply using a military metaphor, as he often does, and is referring to the assistance given to the poor in which case alms would better convey what is occurring; or 3) Cyprian's use of the term could suggest a more formal registry and support of the needy similar to that of the widows and virgins in which case welfare would have a closer connotation.

Felicissimus tried to compete for adherents. Again, just as Cyprian begins to associate the church with its local bishop, his use of mother as an ecclesial metaphor shifts and its referent becomes the bishop rather than the laity.

In his treatise *On the Lapsed*, Cyprian contrasts the confessors and the lapsed. Concerning the former, Cyprian states, “With what joy in her breast does Mother Church receive you back from the fray! How blessed, how happy she is to open her gates for you to enter as, in closed ranks, you bear the trophies of the vanquished foe!”<sup>94</sup> Here, Cyprian portrays the mother as a structure, a walled community with clear boundaries that separate it from the world. The lapsed, however, separated themselves through their sacrifice and are consequently denied the protection and life-giving nourishment of the gated mother. Even children whose parents took them to sacrifice through no will of their own were believed to be contaminated. According to Cyprian, the children on the Day of Judgment will say, “Our parents murdered our souls; it was they who in our name denied the Church to be our Mother, and God to be our Father.”<sup>95</sup> While he still portrays the mother as responsive to the disobedience of her children, he no longer understands her integrity to be synonymous with the action of her members. Rather, he understands the mother/church as a static figure with the children/members determining their relative position to her.

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<sup>94</sup> *lap.* 2 (CCSL 3:221.31-34): “Quam uos laeto sinu excipit mater ecclesia de proelio reuertentes. Quam beata, quam gaudens portas suas aperit, ut adunatis agminibus intretis de hoste prostrato tropaea referentes. Cum triumphantibus uiris et feminae ueniunt quae cum saeculo sexum quoque uicerunt” (Trans. Bevenot, *Lapsed and Unity*, 14).

<sup>95</sup> *lap.* 9 (CCSL 3:225.178-79): “parentes sensimus parricidas: illi nobis ecclesiam matrem, illi patrem deum negauerunt” (Trans. Bevenot, *Lapsed and Unity*, 20).

Consistent with *On the Lapsed*, Cyprian portrays the church in the original version of *On the Unity* as emotionally reactive to her children but not determined by their failures. In *On the Unity*, he states,

For my part I hope, dearest brethren, and I urge and press it upon you, that, if possible, not one of the brethren should perish, but that our Mother should have the happiness of clasping to her bosom all our people in one like-minded body... Nothing that is separated from the parent stock can ever live or breathe apart; all hope of salvation is lost.<sup>96</sup>

He argues that only the true mother grants life, its beginning (baptism) and its continuation (grace). Schism, however, “separates the sons from their mother.”<sup>97</sup>

Schismatics, according to Cyprian, not only separate themselves from the life-giving gifts of Mother Church, but also alienate themselves from God as well:

The spouse of Christ cannot be defiled, she is inviolate and chaste; she knows one home alone, in all modesty she keeps faithfully to one only couch. It is she who rescues us for God, she who seals for the kingdom of sons whom she has borne. Whoever breaks with the Church and enters on an adulterous union, cuts himself off from the promises made to the Church; and he who has turned his back on the Church of Christ shall not come to the rewards of Christ: he is an alien, a worldling, an enemy. *You cannot have God for your Father if you have not the Church for your Mother.*<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> *unit.* 23 (CCSL 3:265.544-45-266.546-47, 266.566-67): “Opto equidem, dilectissimi fratres, et consulo pariter et suadeo ut, si fieri potest, nemo de fratribus pereat, et consentientis populi corpus unum gremio suo gaudens mater includat... quicquid a matrice discesserit, seorsum uiuere et spirare non poterit: substantiam salutis amittit” (Trans. Bevenot, *Lapsed and Unity*, 64-5). See also *ep.* 45.1.2 and 3.2.

<sup>97</sup> *unit.* 19 (CCSL 3:263.472-73): “a matre filios segregat” (Trans. author).

<sup>98</sup> *unit.* 6 (CCSL 3:253.143-150): “Adulterari non potest sponsa christi, incorrupta est et pudica: unam domum nouit, unius cubiculi sanctitatem casto pudore custodit. Haec nos deo seruat, haec filios regno quos generauit adsignat. Quisque ab ecclesia segregatus adulterae iungitur, a promissis ecclesiae separatur, nec perueniet ad christi praemia qui relinquit ecclesiam christi: alienus est, profanus est, hostis est. Habere iam non potest deum patrem qui ecclesiam non habet matrem” (Trans. Bevenot, *Lapsed and Unity*, 48-9). Bevenot links the notion of adultery in *unit.* 6 with Cyprian’s reference to the rape of Susanna in *ep.* 43.4, since there is an issue concerning corruption by others in both instances (*Lapsed and Unity*, 108 nt. 47). However, the analogies in each connote two different things: corruption through force (*ep.* 43) vs. corruption through choice (*unit.* 6). The former fits with Cyprian’s earlier notions of the Church as something able to be affected, while the latter coheres more with his later ecclesiology. It is entirely possible, but speculative, that portions of the above passage, especially the dictum “One cannot have God for a Father...,” belong to the group of revisions that Burns demonstrates Cyprian made to the treatise in 256 (Cyprian the Bishop, 159-62).

Modifying Tertullian's expression of the church's maternity in *On Monogamy*, Cyprian created a dictum that he later employed in the rebaptism controversy.<sup>99</sup> Here, Mother Church functions as the instrument of salvation with which a person must maintain continued relations. According to him, any gathering simply in the name of Christ cannot provide the salvation belonging to the one true mother.

Cyprian repeats these sentiments in *Epistle 44*, a letter to Cornelius concerning Novatian's claim to the Roman see. He states, "They must understand that it is an act of *impietas* to forsake their mother."<sup>100</sup> While his charge of *impietas* against the Novatianists may not seem severe to modern sensibilities, *pietas* was a core virtue in Roman society and an ideal for familial relations. It was a duty of respect owed to one's family. Although *pietas* was long considered to be primarily the deference (*obsequium*) children owed to their *paterfamilias* by virtue of his unmitigated *potestas*, Richard Saller, in his work *Patriarchy, Property, and Death in the Roman Family*, demonstrates that *pietas* was a reciprocal, although not necessarily symmetrical, virtue owed among family members; moreover, *pietas* was not owed to men alone, as mothers were equally owed *pietas* despite their lack of legal and cultural *potestas*.<sup>101</sup> While parental *pietas* involved testamentary duty, children owed obedience to their parents "who bestowed on the

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<sup>99</sup> *De Monog.* 7.9. See also *ep.* 74.7.1, which contains striking similarities to this passage: "Now the birth of Christians is in baptism; and the generation and sanctification of baptism are with the one Bride of Christ. She alone is capable of spiritually bearing and giving birth to sons of God. This being so, where and of what mother and to whom is he born who is not a son of the Church? If a man is to have God for Father, he must first have the Church for mother" (Trans. Clarke, *Letters 4*, 74).

<sup>100</sup> *ep.* 44.3.2 (CCSL 3B:214.38): "inpietatem esse sciant matrem deserere" (Trans. author).

<sup>101</sup> Richard Saller, *Patriarchy, Property, and Death in the Roman Family* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 105-114.

children the *beneficium* of life.”<sup>102</sup> Failure to uphold *pietas* could result in legal ramifications, especially concerning testamentary issues.

Like a Roman mother, the church, according to Cyprian, is owed *pietas* by her children. Unlike a human mother, however, the church as divinely instituted could never act with *impietas* toward her children; she always fulfilled her “obligation” as the source of life. Novatian’s creation of an alternate community was an act of *impietas* against his mother, the church, who provided him with the *beneficium* of life and nourishment. By separating himself from the church, Cyprian argues, Novatian lost his share of the salvific inheritance.

While some of the confessors in Carthage supported the laxists’ cause, the confessors in Rome tended to support Novatian. In *Epistle 46*, Cyprian wrote to Maximus, Nicostratus, and the other rigorist confessors entreating them to return to the church. Applying his analogy from *On the Lapsed*, he states,

I do beg of you that, at least so far as you are concerned, this unlawful rending of our brotherhood should not persist: rather, we beg that, being mindful of your confession and of God’s teachings handed down to us, you should return to your mother from whom you have departed, from whom you went forth to win the glory of confession, bringing such jubilation to your same mother.<sup>103</sup>

Although the confessors, according to Cyprian, left for physical battle by persevering against the secular authorities, they are unable to claim the church as their mother, since they failed to support Cornelius, the properly ordained bishop of Rome. Against the rigorists, Cyprian measures an individual’s affiliation to Mother Church by their

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<sup>102</sup> Saller, *Patriarchy*, 114.

<sup>103</sup> *ep.* 46.1.3 (CCSL 3B:225.15-19): “Quod quaeso ut in uobis saltem illicitum istud fraternitatis nostrae discidium non perseueret, sed et confessionis uestrae et diuinae traditionis memores ad matrem reuertamini unde prodistis, unde ad confessionis gloriam cum eiusdem matris exultatione uenistis” (Trans. Clarke, *Letters 2*, 73). Cf. *lap.* 2.



commitment to the bishop, and in doing so, identifies the episcopate with *mater ecclesia*. Again to the rigorist confessors, he states, “Because we are not able to depart from the church (which it then would be forsaken) and come over to you, we strive and ask, with all the exhortations by which we are able, that rather you return to mother church and to your brotherhood.”<sup>104</sup> Since the confessors left the Christian mother and bonds of brotherly love, Cyprian believes that they are the ones who must return on their own accord.<sup>105</sup>

Just as Cyprian understands the schismatic sacramental rituals as polluting anti-types of the Catholic sacraments, he also depicts their community as an anti-type of the *mater ecclesia*. In *Epistle 59*, Cyprian responds to Cornelius who had recently encountered the laxist party in Rome:

True reconciliation they destroy by their false and fallacious reconciliation; the step-mother impedes them from reaching their true mother’s healing embrace, anxious to prevent her from hearing any sobbing and weeping coming from the hearts and lips of those who have fallen.<sup>106</sup>

Here, Cyprian represents the schismatic community as a step-mother (*nouerca*). Despite the prevalence and social acceptance of dislocation in the Roman household, which resulted in various maternal figures, there still existed the notion of the evil stepmother,

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<sup>104</sup> *ep.* 46.2.2 (CCSL 3B:225.25-27): “quia nos ecclesia derelicta foras exire et ad uos uenire non possumus, ut uos magis ad ecclesiam matrem et ad uestram fraternitatem reuertamini quibus possumus hortamentis petimus et rogamus” (Trans. author). See also *epp.* 47.1.1 and 48.3.1.

<sup>105</sup> Interestingly, Cyprian does not use the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32) as one would expect here. In fact, Cyprian never cites this passage in his entire work, but in a letter to Antonianus (*ep.* 55), he uses the parable of the Lost Sheep (Lk 15:4-5); Fahey believes that the parable of the Lost sheep is suggested in *ep.* 51 to Cornelius (*Cyprian and the Bible*, 353-4).

<sup>106</sup> *ep.* 59.13.2 (CCSL 3C:358.337-39): “Pax uera falsae pacis mendacio tollitur, salutaris sinus matris nouerca intercedente cluditur, ne de pectore atque ore lapsorum fletus et gemitus audiatur” (Trans. Clarke, *Letters 3*, 79-80).

and he clearly exploits this in *Epistle 59*.<sup>107</sup> He considers the mother of schismatic communities to be fraudulent, deceiving individuals from returning to their true mother where the only opportunity of repentance exists.

During this period, Cyprian employs three female Old Testament figures to represent the church: Susanna, Hannah, and the mother in 2 Maccabees. Although the first was not a mother, his use of her is worth noting. In *Epistle 43*, written in response to Felicissimus' schism, he relates the story of Susanna and the attempted rape made upon her by two elders:

In their hoary wickedness they resemble the two elders: just as these elders sought to defile and violate the virtuous Susannah, so do these church elders seek by their adulterous teachings to defile the virtue of the Church and to violate the truth of the Gospel.<sup>108</sup>

As Clarke notes, Cyprian is directly playing with the pun on elders (*presbyteri*), linking the aged renegade presbyters with those elders in Daniel 13.<sup>109</sup> However, he may also be alluding to the pun within the text itself and linking it to the schism of Felicissimus and others. When the first elder testified, he claimed to have been under a mastic tree (*schinus*) to which Daniel responded that an angel under God's directive will cut him (*schindo*) in two. No doubt this clever double-play on the words *prebyteri* and *schisma*

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<sup>107</sup> Two infamous ancient accounts of stepmothers are Juvenal, who states that stepmothers always tried to poison their stepchildren (6.626-33), and Pliny the Younger, who presents stepmothers as conniving shrews who sought to rob their stepchildren from their inheritance (*ep.* 6.33). While these sources cannot be used to reconstruct an accurate portrayal of real relations between children and their stepmothers, it does suggest the pervasiveness of the stereotype, which did manifest itself in actual social relations (see Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Mother* (Normon: Oklahoma Press, 1988), 155-161). This stigma was not as prevalent in regard to other motherly substitutes (see Keith R. Bradley, *Discovering the Roman Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 13-29, 76-95).

<sup>108</sup> *ep.* 43.4.3 (CCSL 3B:205.79-83): "Nec aetas uos eorum nec auctoritas fallat, qui ad duorum presbyterorum ueterem nequitiam respondentes, sicut illi Susannam pudicam corrumpere et uiolare conati sunt, sic et hi adulterinis doctrinis ecclesiae pudicitiam corrumpere et ueritatem euangelicam uiolare conantur" (Trans. Clarke, *Letters* 2, 64).

<sup>109</sup> Clarke, *Letters* 2, 220 nt. 21.

was easily recognizable to Cyprian's audience. Thus, he may be warning his audience that the schismatic presbyters who are attempting to rend the church will also be cut down by God, just as the elders were in Daniel 13 (Susanna).

Of Cyprian's three previous figures for *mater ecclesia* (Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah), only Hannah is used during this period. In his treatise *The Lord's Prayer* (late 251), he contrasts Hannah's humble supplication with the clamorous prayer of the ill-disciplined. This is probably in response to the lapsed who forcefully demanded reconciliation in Cyprian's absence, and it may suggest that some of those who remained in communion with Cyprian continued to be indignant toward his demands of penitential discipline.<sup>110</sup> Interestingly, Cyprian does not discuss the church as mother in his discourse on God as Father, a common association that Augustine will repeatedly make.

Cyprian's most involved typological analysis occurs in *To Fortunatus*, another compendium of scriptural passages like *Testimonies*. Written to the bishop of Thuccabari,<sup>111</sup> he composed *To Fortunatus* around 253<sup>112</sup> in response to a perceived threat of persecution during the principate of Gallus.<sup>113</sup> When he turns to his discussion of 2 Maccabees, his treatment changes from a simple list of relevant scriptural passage to a prolonged discussion of the Church; indeed, as Benson notes, his treatment becomes

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<sup>110</sup> *orat.* 5.

<sup>111</sup> J. Quasten assumes that the Fortunatus that Cyprian is writing to is the same Fortunatus of Thuccabari who was present at the September synod of 256 (*Patrology Vol. 2: The Ante-Nicene Literature after Irenaeus* (Westminster: The Newman Press, 1953), 362). Sage argues that while the text suggests that Fortunatus was a bishop (*pref.* 2), there is no evidence to deduce precisely who he was, since it was a common name (*Cyprian*, 346 nt.1).

<sup>112</sup> While Sage dates *Ad Fortunatum* after August of 257, following Pontius's list (*Vita* 7.9) and connecting the occasion of the treatise to the Valerian persecution (*Cyprian*, 382-3), Koch's argument, which is based on Cyprian's style and language, is more convincing. H. Koch, *Cyprianische Untersuchungen* (Bonn: Marcus and Weber, 1926), 149-83.

<sup>113</sup> In *ep.* 57.1.2, Cyprian expresses his concern that the signs for another persecution are evident; however, there is no indication that such persecution took place, see Clarke, *Letters* 3, 4-8.

“almost a sermon.”<sup>114</sup> Although Cyprian’s comparison of the seven sons to the seven churches is similar to his exegesis in *Testimonies*, both his length of exposition and inclusion of the mother are different from his previous work.

After making a lengthy connection between the seven sons and the seven churches, he states,

With the seven sons was clearly joined their mother, the origin and root, who subsequently had borne seven churches; she herself was the first and the only one founded upon the stone by the voice of the Lord. It is not meaningless that the mother is the only one with her suffering children. For the martyrs, who prove themselves sons of God in their suffering, are now regarded as not belonging to any father except God.<sup>115</sup>

Cyprian correlates the singularity and exclusivity of the mother with his exegesis of Matthew 16:18. The mother, like Peter, functioned as the origin and root (*origo et radix*) of ecclesial unity. While he remotely associated the mother with the local bishop in *On the Unity*, here he does so more explicitly by linking her to Peter whom Cyprian understands to represent the authority of the local bishop.<sup>116</sup> Moreover, in *To Fortunatus*, along with *On the Lapsed* 9, he associates the singularity and exclusivity of both the mother (the church) and the father (God), laying the groundwork for his later and often

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<sup>114</sup> Edward White Benson, *Cyprian: His Life, His Times, His Works* (repr.) (Adamant Media, 1897), 475. Benson bases this on the fact that Cyprian’s comments continuously become lengthier and more rhetorical as the compendium progresses.

<sup>115</sup> *Ad Fort.* 11 (CCSL 3:205.106-206.111): “Cum septem liberis plane copulatur et mater, origo et radix, quae ecclesias septem postmodum peperit, ipsa prima et una super petrum domini uoce fundata. Nec uacat quod in passionibus sola cum liberis mater est. Martyres enim qui se dei filios in passione testantur iam non nisi deo patre censentur” (Trans. author).

<sup>116</sup> Jane Merdinger gives a strong discussion on Cyprian’s use of *origo* and its connection to Peter. Merdinger rightly locates the origins of this concept with Tertullian, which is further explicated by Cyprian. See Jane Merdinger, *Rome and the African Church in the Time of Augustine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 43-9.

quoted dictum, “One cannot have God for a Father who does not have the church for a mother.”<sup>117</sup>

Concerning the mother’s reaction to her sons’ deaths (2 Mac 7:27ff), Cyprian states,

Also the admirable mother, who was neither overtaken by the weakness of her sex nor disturbed by her manifold bereavement, watched her dying children with gladness and understood them together not as pledges of punishment but of glory, giving just as great of witness to God through her eyes as her sons had given through their tortures and suffering of limbs.<sup>118</sup>

For Cyprian, the mother’s exhortation to the seventh son to follow his brothers’ acts of martyrdom is not simply due to her bravery but to her *pietas* and fear toward God.

Concerning the latter, he writes,

There is great praise of the mother in her exhortation to virtue, but there is greater praise in her fear of God and in her true nature of faith, that she promised nothing to herself or to her son from the honor of the six martyrs nor believed that the prayer of the brothers would benefit the salvation of the one who denied; rather, she persuaded him to become a partner of suffering so that he would be found among his brothers on the Day of Judgment.<sup>119</sup>

In addition to illustrating the close association that Cyprian makes between faith and fear, which is a common theme throughout his works, this passage demonstrates that he hardened his position concerning the reconciliatory efficacy of the *libelli matyrium*.

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<sup>117</sup> If *On the Unity* 6 is later revision, then this dictum does not occur until 256. The only other place it is reproduced is in *ep.* 74.7.2 (late spring/early summer 256).

<sup>118</sup> *Ad Fort.* 11 (CCSL 3:208.160-65): “Admirabilis quoque mater quae nec sexus infirmitate fracta nec multiplici orbitate commota morientes liberos spectauit libenter nec poenas illas pignorum sed glorias computauit, tam grande martyrium deo praebens uirtute oculorum suorum quam praebuerant filii eius tormentis et passione membrorum” (Trans. author).

<sup>119</sup> *Ad Fort.* 11 (CCSL 3:209.183-88): “Magna laus matris in exhortatione uirtutis, sed maior in dei timore et in fidei ueritate, quod nihil sibi aut filio de sex martyrum honore promisit nec fratrum praecem profuturam credidit ad negantis salutem, persuasit potius participem passionis fieri, ut in iudicii die posset cum fratribus inueniri” (Trans. author).

While against the rebellious lapsed and confessors he had reduced the intercessory powers of the martyrs by arguing that the *libelli martyrium* only applied to the final judgment of the lapsed and not their present reconciliation to the community, he now affirms that not even the petitions from six martyred brothers could gain the salvation for the other brother should he fail to confess. With the possibility of another persecution in Africa, one predicted to be much worse than that of Decius, Cyprian preemptively attempts to ensure that another problem with rogue confessors will not arise.

One final note in Cyprian's exegesis of 2 Maccabees concerns the addition of apocalypticism to his understanding of *mater ecclesia*. Regarding the fate of the mother in 2 Maccabees, he states,

After this, the mother dies with her children as well; for certainly there should not be anything else than this – that she who had brought forth and produced martyrs should be joined with them in their partnership of glory and that she herself should also follow those whom she had sent ahead to God.<sup>120</sup>

This passage demonstrates that Cyprian did not perceive the church as a celestial, pre-existing, or hypostasized community. Given his strong association of the mother of 2 Maccabees with *mater ecclesia*, this passage suggests that he believes the church was coming to an end with the emperor, Gallus, ushering in the apocalypse; the church, as mother, would die with her children, since she was a structure *super terram*. He may even be alluding to his own perceived death, since by this point he associates the church with the local bishop. Regardless, this is an idiosyncratic passage in Cyprian's work, since he does not allude to the end of the temporal community anywhere else in his works. After

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<sup>120</sup> *Ad Fort.* 11 (CCSL 3:209.188-91): “Post haec liberis suis commoritur et mater: neque enim aliud iam licebat quam ut quae martyras et pepererat et fecerat in consortio illis gloriae iungeretur et quos ad deum praemiserat ipsa quoque sequeretur” (Trans. author).

the threat of persecution diminished, the apocalyptic tenor in his work does as well. So it is difficult to ascertain whether or not this belief remained latent in Cyprian's understanding of *mater ecclesia*.

### 3. The Pure Mother: 256

Cyprian further nuances his understanding of *mater ecclesia* in the final year of his episcopate once he enters into the rebaptism controversy with Stephen, and continues to shift the application of the metaphor from the local community to the universal church. During this period, he intensifies the distinction between the true mother (the Catholic Church) and the false mother (anything outside the church). At the beginning of his controversy with Stephen over the reconciliation and baptism of schismatics, he claims that the laying on of hands only applies to reconciling those already baptized in the Catholic Church, since they received a true spiritual birth: "If they later recognize their sin, cast aside error, and return to truth and their loving mother, it is sufficient to lay hands on them."<sup>121</sup> However, those baptized outside of the Church were never actually born from the true mother.<sup>122</sup> It is clear that Cyprian during the rebaptism controversy strengthens his position that there is but one church, just as there is only one biological mother who can give birth, since only she has the gifts required for salvation. While he still associates the mother with a nurturing, earthly function that lacks the theoretical speculation of other thinkers, such as Origen, he nevertheless distinguishes the church

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<sup>121</sup> *ep.* 71.2.2 (CCSL 3C:518.40-42): "si postmodum peccato suo cognito et errore digesto ad ueritatem et matricem redeant, satis sit in paenitentiam manum inponere" (Trans. Clarke, *Letters* 4, 50).

<sup>122</sup> *ep.* 73.24.3. See also *epp.* 73.19.2. and 74.7.1.

and mother from the local community, making her a distinct quasi-entity that functions as the only instrument of grace.

To defend the African practice of (re)baptizing those baptized in schismatic or heretical communities, Cyprian further emphasizes the exclusivity of the Catholic Church and the pollution inherent in the rituals of other groups, especially those of the rigorists. In *Epistle 74*, he responds to bishop Pompeius' request for Stephen's reply to Cyprian, a letter no longer extant:

Now if rebirth is in this washing, that is to say baptism, how can heresy, which is not the bride of Christ, give birth to sons, through Christ, to God? It is the Church alone, being joined and united to Christ, who spiritually gives birth to sons... And so, if she is His beloved, the bride who alone is sanctified by Christ and alone is cleansed by His washing, then obviously heresy, being no bride of Christ and incapable of being cleansed or sanctified by His washing, is also incapable of giving birth to sons of God.<sup>123</sup>

Cyprian here makes a clear link between the motherhood of the church and the inviolate Bride of Christ and articulates that not only does the alternate mother fail to provide nourishment, as he argued earlier, but she also does not possess the fecundity to birth sons.<sup>124</sup>

In a later revision of *On the Unity*, he states,

The authority of the bishops forms a unity, of which each holds his part in its totality. And the Church forms a unity, however far she spreads and multiplies by the progeny of her fecundity... one source, one mother who is prolific in her offspring, generation after generation: of her womb we

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<sup>123</sup> *ep. 74.6.2* (CCSL 3C:571.115-18, 120-24): "Si autem in lauacro id est in baptismo est regeneratio, quomodo generare filios deo haeresis per Christum potest quae Christi sponsa non est? Ecclesia est enim sola quae Christo coniuncta et adunata spiritaliter filios generat... Si igitur haec est dilecta et sponsa quae sola a Christo sanctificatur et lauacro eius sola purgatur, manifestum est haeresim, quae sponsa Christi non sit nec purgari nec sanctificari lauacro eius possit, filios deo generare non posse" (Trans. Clarke, *Letters 4*, 73-4). See also *ep. 73.11.1-2*.

<sup>124</sup> His earlier pairing of the images (i.e., Bride of Christ and Mother Church) is in *unit. 6*.



are born, of her milk we fed, of her Spirit our souls draw their life-breath.<sup>125</sup>

Through viscerally feminine imagery, Cyprian argues that there can only be one mother, one source of birth and continual sustenance. The metaphor of mother for him functions the same way as his revised exegesis of Matthew 16:18 concerning the keys of Peter, namely the mother/church represents a divinely instituted unity signified by the collective authority of the bishops through which all Christians are bound. There is no mention or implicit association of unity predicated of the local community. Anything outside of the church, or the collective authority of the bishops, cannot for Cyprian possibly birth or nourish Christians. This suggests an intensification of a trend already apparent in his thought, in which the church is becoming more abstract, as Cyprian shifts the purity of the church to the episcopal college. While he never fully divorces *mater ecclesia* from its earthly domain, its local character is greatly diminished as he emphasizes an ecclesiology that is less socially visible in its composition.

### **Other Contemporary North African Uses of *Mater Ecclesia***

Other contemporary North African writers reflect Cyprian's use of *mater ecclesia* as well.<sup>126</sup> At the seventh synod of Carthage (September 256), numerous bishops in their *sententia* invoke the title *mater ecclesia* or compare opposing ecclesial communities with adulterous unions. Bishop Monnulus of Girba claims that the tradition of the *mater*

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<sup>125</sup> *unit.* 5 (CCSL 3:252.127-253.129, 140-42): "Episcopatus unus est cuius a singulis in solidum pars tenetur. Ecclesia una est quae in multitudinem latius incremento fecunditatis extenditur... origo una, et una mater fecunditatis successibus copiosa: illius fetu nascimur, illius lacte nutrimur, spiritu eius animamur" (Trans. Bevenot, *Lapsed and Unity*, 47-8).

<sup>126</sup> *ep.* 75.14, despite its developed notion of *mater ecclesia*, is being excluded from this analysis, since it was written by the Cappadocian bishop of Caesarea, Firmilian, and thus, outside the scope of the present investigation.

*ecclesia* is to baptize in the name of the Trinity and adds, “Therefore, since we clearly know that heretics do not possess either the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit, they should be reborn and baptized when they come to our Mother Church.”<sup>127</sup> The Numidian bishop, Cassius of Macodama, while not using the term *mater ecclesia*, appeals to household imagery and claims that those coming to the true church are no longer “sons of adultery” (*adulteros filios*).<sup>128</sup> Secundius of Carpi asserts that those baptized outside of the true church are illegitimate children born of the Antichrist.<sup>129</sup> Echoing Cyprian, Felix of Uthina states,

All heretics who come to the bosom of Mother Church should be baptized so that their heretical minds, which have been polluted by long decay, may be reformed for the better having been purged though the sanctifying wash [of baptism].<sup>130</sup>

While it is impossible to discern whether or not Cyprian’s language influenced his colleagues’ understanding of the church, it is clear that many of the North African bishops by 256 portrayed their church to be an inviolate mother.

Four other North African works briefly mention the *mater ecclesia*. The most developed use of the metaphor outside of Cyprian comes from Commodian, the author of

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<sup>127</sup> *sent.* 10 (CCSL 3E:31.138-40): “Cum ergo manifeste sciamus haereticos non habere nec patrem nec filium nec spiritum sanctum, debent uenientes ad ecclesiam matrem nostram uere renasci et baptizari” (Trans. author).

<sup>128</sup> *sent.* 22 (CCSL 3E:43.200). In *sent.* 49, Bishop Venantius of Timisa expounds on this notion of equating heretical churches with adulterers stating, “Si maritus peregre proficiscens amico suo commendasset uxorem suam custodiendam, commendatam sibi ille quanta posset diligentia conseruaret, ne ab aliquo castitas eius et sanctitas adulteraretur. Christus dominus et deus noster ad patrem proficiscens sponsam suam nobis commendauit... Qui enim baptisma ecclesiae commune cum haereticis facit sponsam Christi adulteris prodit” (CCSL 3E:75.355-60, 362-64).

<sup>129</sup> *sent.* 24.

<sup>130</sup> *sent.* 26 (CCSL 3E:47.225-28): “ut omnes haeretici, qui ad sinum matris ecclesiae adcurrunt, baptizentur, ut mens haeretica, quae diuturna tabe polluta est, sanctificatione lauacri purgata in melius reformetur” (Trans. author).

the *Instructions* and *Song of Two Peoples*. Although the date and location of his poetic compositions have been the focus of debate among scholars, many today locate his work to North Africa around the third century, making him a contemporary of Cyprian.<sup>131</sup> In the fifty-first acrostic, Commodian comments on the culpability of children on the basis of the sinful actions of their parents, although it is unclear if he is referring to those parents who had lapsed or had not yet become Christian. Here Commodian exhorts, “I urge that adults should rush back to that inner court and be born as it were from their mother’s womb for a second time.”<sup>132</sup> Commodian also applies the maternal imagery to the church when he encourages the penitents to remain steadfast in their discipline and not to stray from their mother.<sup>133</sup> These notions of mother can be contrasted to Commodian’s portrayal of mothers whom he considered to be in a state of sin. Concerning the end of times, Commodian asks how a mother expects to feed her child when she herself is being burned in the flames of judgment.<sup>134</sup> As with Cyprian, Commodian was influenced by the current imperial persecutions and understands the ecclesial mother and her generative power to be exclusive and necessary for salvation, which he contrasts with the failures of various earthly mothers, who fail to nourish their children and consequently carry them to damnation. However, in Commodian’s work, there is a greater sense of urgency to return to the mother and a stronger sense of

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<sup>131</sup> For a thorough discussion of the debate surrounding the date and location of authorship see Angelo DiBerardino, “Commodian,” in *Patrology, Vol. 4* (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1986), 259-262.

<sup>132</sup> *instr.* 2.6 (CCSL 128:47.6-7): “Attamen adultos hortor, in aula recurrent, nascuntur que quasi denuo suae matri de uentre” (Trans. author).

<sup>133</sup> *instr.* 2.4.

<sup>134</sup> *instr.* 1.43.

exclusivity than in Cyprian, no doubt due to his chiliastic apocalypticism and heavy reliance on Revelation.

Three other works, all of which are anonymous, also contain references to the church as mother. In the treatise *On Rebaptism*, written most likely as a riposte against Cyprian and his colleagues' decision at the September synod of 256,<sup>135</sup> the author argues much in the same vein as Stephen: those baptized in the name of Christ, even if in heresy, need only the bishop to lay on hands for the reception of the Holy Spirit. For the author, heretics seek to raise disorder in the church by individually advancing something against the collectively accepted tradition. According to the author, this is an offense directly perpetrated against *mater ecclesia* and is further compounded when committed by a bishop.<sup>136</sup> The author of the treatise *Concerning the Mountains of Sinai and Zion* (ca. 255),<sup>137</sup> like Cyprian, applies the story of Rebecca and her two sons (Gen 25:23) as a prefiguration of those who are in the eternal womb of the church.<sup>138</sup> Finally, the author of *On the Singularity of the Priesthood* (ca. 275)<sup>139</sup> simply uses the term when writing

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<sup>135</sup> While there is little debate concerning the date of the treatise, scholars disagree on the location of its composition. Some have argued that it was an Italian treatise mentioned in *ep.* 73.4-5 (see J. Ernst, "Zeit und Heimat des Liber de rebaptismate," *TQ* 90 (1908): 579-613). The dominant view, however, is that the biblical citations and absence of Peter and Paul references suggests a North African origin (see P. Monceaux, *Histoire littéraire de l'Afrique chrétienne depuis les origines jusqu'à l'invasion arabe*, Vol. 2 (Paris: E. Leroux, 1902), 92-3). Plumpe thinks that a Mauretanian bishop wrote it (*Mater Ecclesia*, 106). Sage suggests either a Mauretanian or Numidian opponent (*Cyprian*, 306 nt. 5). See Benson for a summation concerning the manuscript and early opinions of date and location (*Cyprian*, 390-92). Quasten believes it was a North African prelate (*Patrology* 2, 368).

<sup>136</sup> *rebapt.* 1 and 6.

<sup>137</sup> H. Koch demonstrates that the *terminus a quo* is 255 (*Cyprianische Untersuchungen*, 421-5). Although A. Harnack places the treatise earlier sometime between 210-240 ("Zur Schrift Pseudocyprians De montibus Sina et Sion," *TU* 20, no. 3 (1900): 135-147).

<sup>138</sup> *Sinai and Zion* 3 (CSEL 3.3:107.2-4): "partem credulam uiuentem per fidem, hanc unam partem gentium designat in utero ecclesiae permanere generationem in aeternum."

<sup>139</sup> Following Morin, Harnack believes that the treatise was written by Macrobius, a Donatist bishop in Rome ("Der pseudocyprianische Traktat de singularitate clericorum ein Werk des donatistischen Bischofs

against clerics who are living with women who are not their relatives (*subintroductae*), but he provides little exposition of the metaphor.<sup>140</sup> While none of these compare to the frequency or depth of Cyprian's usage, they do nevertheless point to a heightened sensibility among North Africans to understand and personify the church as a nurturing and fecund female figure. Among the extant sources, no other area at this time, especially in the West, employs the metaphor with such frequency,<sup>141</sup> which has left one scholar to conclude that "Christian Africa of the time of St. Cyprian was the classical land of the *Mater Ecclesia*."<sup>142</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Cyprian's use of *mater ecclesia* was intimately bound to his ecclesiology. Just as his ecclesiology developed over time against competing factions in his church and abroad, the characteristics of the mother also changed. In the beginning of his episcopacy, while the church was strongly identified with the local community, *mater ecclesia* functioned as an intimately passive figure who reflected the community itself both in its joys and sorrows. By the end of his episcopacy, however, the image of mother had

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Macrobius in Rom," *TU* 24, no. 3 (1903): 363-75). Although this opinion has been uncritically accepted by some scholars (see M. Tilley in *The Bible in Christian North Africa: The Donatist World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 82), Koch persuasively argues against this notion and places the treatise near the end of the third century (*Cyprianische Untersuchungen*, 426-472). See also Plumpe (*Mater Ecclesia*, 107) and Quasten (*Patrology* 2, 369).

<sup>140</sup> *Singularity of the Priesthood* 29 (CSEL 3.3:206.1): "Illorum erit sincera fraternitas aestimanda, de quibus filiae matris ecclesiae perducuntur in culpam."

<sup>141</sup> Cornelius in all of his letters to Cyprian never once used the term, nor did Novatian use the term in any of his surviving works. I agree with Plumpe (*Mater Ecclesia*, 108) that the use of *mater ecclesia* in the anonymous works, *On Rebaptism*, *Concerning the Mountains of Sinai and Zion*, and *On the Singularity of the Priesthood* provides further evidence that these texts are North African in origin.

<sup>142</sup> Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia*, 108.

drastically changed; she became an abstract figure, personally separated from the community and the exclusive dispenser of salvation. This shift correlates with Cyprian's move to associate the authority of the church with the universal, apostolic college of bishops who collectively functioned to uphold the purity of the church.

This analysis challenges two previously held assumptions concerning Cyprian's use of *mater ecclesia*. First, Cyprian's notion of *mater ecclesia* was not void of speculation. While his use of the maternal metaphor was unreflectively shaped by his polemical concerns, the association he made between *mater ecclesia* and *sponsa Christi* was a major shift in the North African concept of *mater ecclesia*. The position that his *mater ecclesia* lacks a theoretical understanding is an over-generalization and fails to appreciate the nuance within Cyprian's thought.

Second, Cyprian's portrayal of *mater ecclesia* did not remain entirely static throughout his episcopate but developed concurrently with his ecclesiology. Early in his career, he identified the church with the local Christian community, and as such, *mater ecclesia* reflected the collective actions of its members. Later, when he began to identify the church with the episcopate, his use of the maternal metaphor became less terrestrial in its connotation. What did remain constant, however, was the metaphor's connotation of exclusivity, which Irenaeus and Tertullian had previously established. When dealing with the various ecclesial controversies in Carthage, Cyprian found the metaphor of *mater ecclesia* particularly useful and continuously employed it as a means of delineating group membership. Regardless of how he reconstructed the boundary of the church, he maintained the metaphor of Mother Church as a symbol of that boundary.

## CHAPTER IV

### MOTHER OF ALL CHRISTIANS: *MATER ECCLESIA* IN THE WORKS OF AUGUSTINE

*Mater ecclesia* was already a ubiquitous concept for understanding the church in North Africa by the time Augustine became a bishop and utilized the maternal metaphor. Popularized in large part by Cyprian's dictum, fourth-century North Africans relied on the image of the church as mother to demarcate true ecclesial membership in their polemical debates. Optatus, the Numidian bishop of Milevis, repeatedly appealed to the maternal metaphor in his opposition against the Donatist leader Parmenian. In his work *Against the Donatists* (ca. 384),<sup>1</sup> Optatus incorporated Cyprian's imagery (cf. *ep.* 73) to argue that Donatists were schismatics "having been cut off from the root of the mother church by the blade of bitterness" and urged them to return to the bosom and peace of *mater ecclesia*.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, the Donatists appealed to Cyprian's use of *mater ecclesia* to argue against the Catholics that they themselves were the true church. Appealing to Cyprian's association of purity with *mater ecclesia*, the Donatists claimed that only they were the true children of the untainted mother.<sup>3</sup>

The fourth century not only witnessed continued literary use of *mater ecclesia*, but the church's maternity began to be represented architecturally as well. In the Tunisian

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Edwards, *Against the Donatists* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), xvi-xix.

<sup>2</sup> *de schism. Don.* 1.11 (SC 412: 196.6-7): "a radice matris ecclesiae inuidiae falcibus" (Trans. Edwards, *Against the Donatists*, 11). See *de schism. Don.* 1.11, 2.10, 2.15, 3.10, 4.2, 4.5, 7.2. Against the claims of the Donatist Macrobius, Optatus states that trickery is the mother of schism (*de schism. Don.* 2.4). For Optatus's sacramental use of *mater ecclesia*, see Jensen, "Mater Ecclesia and Fons Aeterna," 143.

<sup>3</sup> The Donatist use of *mater ecclesia* is dealt with more explicitly later in the chapter.

coastal city of Tabarka (the ancient Numidian city of Thabraca), a late fourth-century sepulchral mosaic architecturally represents *mater ecclesia* on the tomb marker/cover of a certain Valentia. Presently located in the Bardo Museum in Tunis, the mosaic displays a typical North African church in the basilica style, and over the columns the inscription reads *ECCLESIA MATER / VALENTIA IN PACE*.<sup>4</sup> The mosaic is unusual for funerary representations,<sup>5</sup> and the link made between Valentia and the church suggests she may have had a prominent role in the community, perhaps as a significant donor for the church's construction.<sup>6</sup> Like most of the funerary symbols and motifs found on tomb mosaics in Tabarka, this image suggests the promise of salvation to the deceased, but unlike the other portrait types found there (dolphins, wreaths, etc.), the Valentia mosaic ties the promise explicitly to the church.<sup>7</sup>

The most concrete manifestation of the church's maternity is the polylobed-shaped font located in the modern-day Tunisian city of Sbeitla (the ancient city of Sufetula in the Roman province of Byzacena).<sup>8</sup> Built sometime in the late fourth century, the font is located adjacent to the Bellator Basilica in the Chapel of Jucundus and is

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<sup>4</sup> See appendix, fig. 1. For an analysis of the Tabarkan representation and North African ecclesial architecture, see Jensen, "Church Buildings in Roman Africa," (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Margaret A. Alexander, "Mosaic Ateliers at Tabarka," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 41 (1987): 1-11. See also Mark J. Johnson, "Toward a History of Theoderic's Building Program," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 42 (1988): 90-1.

<sup>6</sup> Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia*, 54.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Maguire, "The Good Life," in *Late Antique and Medieval Art of the Mediterranean World* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), ed. Eva R. Hoffman (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 76-7.

<sup>8</sup> See Noël Duval's copious studies on Sufetula, especially N. Duval and F. Baratte, *Les ruines de Sufetula-Sbeitla* (Tunis: Societe Tunisienne de Diffusion, 1973); for more recent works, see F. Bejaoui, *Sbeitla, l'antique Sufetula* (Tunis: Agence de mise en valeur du patrimoine et de promotion culturelle, 2004) and Jensen, "Church Buildings in Roman Africa," (forthcoming).



shaped to represent a vulva.<sup>9</sup> The purpose of the font's unusual labial shape, as Robin Jensen notes, was to highlight visually the idea that baptism functions as a true rebirth from the spiritual womb of Mother Church.<sup>10</sup> This font's design is repeated in the baptistery of the Basilica of Vitalis, a larger cathedral constructed in the fifth or sixth century built possibly to replace the modest-sized Bellator Basilica in Sufetula.<sup>11</sup> While unusual and limited to a single North African city, both fonts nevertheless exhibit an architectural representation of a theological concept, attesting to the pervasive understanding in North Africa of the church as a birthing mother. Both the fonts of Sufetula and the mosaic at Tabarka demonstrate how central *mater ecclesia* was in the lives and imagination of Christians in North Africa by the end of the fourth century; she was seen as integral in the spiritual birth of her members and also invoked at their physical death.

Although inheriting a well-established tradition, Augustine utilized and developed the concept of *mater ecclesia* more than any other preceding North African writer. He explicitly used the maternal metaphor in over eighty polemical and pastoral works and

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<sup>9</sup> See appendix, fig. 2. Everett Ferguson describes both the Jucundus font and the Vitalis font as having an irregular cruciform shape situated in an oval (*Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 841-2). However, Jensen's interpretation is much more convincing; see, "*Mater Ecclesia and Fons Aeterna*," 153; "Baptismal Rites and Architecture," in *Late Ancient Christianity*, ed. Virginia Burrus (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 133-4, 139; and "Church Buildings in Roman Africa," (forthcoming).

<sup>10</sup> Jensen, "Church Buildings in Roman Africa," (forthcoming). For a general overview of font shapes and their symbolism, see J. G. Davies, *The Architectural Setting of Baptism* (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1962), 18-26 and S. Anita Stauffer, "Fonts: Baptism, Pascha, and Paradise," *SL* 24 (1994): 58-65; neither, however, identify or discuss vaginally shaped fonts.

<sup>11</sup> See appendix, fig. 3. While the Vitalis baptistery is Byzantine, the baptistery in the Chapel of Jucundus is dated to the late fourth century, since Jucundus died in the early fifth century and buried in the chapel.

created the most florid descriptions of the Church's maternity.<sup>12</sup> Along with his other dominant ecclesial image, the Body of Christ, *mater ecclesia* functioned as a central metaphor in Augustine's portrayal of the role and character of the church. The importance of *mater ecclesia* in his ecclesiology only more recently has become the focus of scholarly study as evinced in the works of Springer, Jensen, and Bavel.<sup>13</sup>

Despite this recent attention, there has been no in-depth systematic investigation of Augustine's various applications of *mater ecclesia*. Likely due to the breadth of his corpus, coupled with his multifarious treatments of *mater ecclesia*, previous studies tend to be focused on a particular aspect of his maternal portrayal of the church or a work in which it is considerably utilized, and they often lack comparative analysis with preceding North African uses. As a result, the complexity and development of *mater ecclesia* in his thought is overlooked. The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, Augustine's use of *mater ecclesia* will be analyzed with respect to his polemical concerns; this will demonstrate that, while he used the maternal metaphor throughout his career to explicate his notion of the church, he predictably manipulated the metaphor to meet his present agenda. Second, this study will focus on the similarities and differences between Augustine's use of Mother Church with that of his North African predecessors. I will demonstrate that he significantly augmented the concept of *mater ecclesia*, especially as it relates to biblical exegesis and Mariology, while continuing its characteristically North African connotation of exclusivity.

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<sup>12</sup> Augustine's use of the term is so extensive and his corpus so large that such a study would not have been as feasible without use of the *Corpus Augustinianum Gissense* (CAG 2), ed. Cornelius P. Mayer (Basel: Schwabe, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> Jensen, "*Mater Ecclesia* and *Fons Aeterna*," 143-5; Springer, "The *prosopopoeia* of Church as Mother," 52-65; Bavel, "Maternal Aspects in Salvation History according to Augustine," 251-90.

## Augustine's Polemical Engagements and Ecclesiological Development

### 1. Manichaeism and the Historical Church

Manichaeism was especially prevalent in North Africa and was a significant rival to Catholic Christianity. By the late third century, less than twenty years after its founder's execution in 277, Manichaeism superseded Gnosticism in popularity and continued to remain active in North Africa at least until the early eighth century, despite scandalous rumors and active persecutions levied against them.<sup>14</sup> Its popularity was due in large part to the syncretistic nature of Manichaeism coupled with its focus on reason and asceticism.

Like Christianity, Manichaeism attempted to answer the fundamental questions concerning existence and the presence of evil in the created order. Unlike Christianity, however, Manichaeism held a notion of primordial dualism between light/good/God and dark/bad/matter; when the Kingdom of Darkness attacked the Kingdom of Light, it resulted in the commingling of the two and the creation of the physical world, which subsequently was then comprised of both good and evil. Manichean soteriology centered on separating this unnatural mixture through the acquisition of esoteric knowledge and participating in various ascetical practices.<sup>15</sup> Also similar to Christianity, Manichaeism

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<sup>14</sup> W. H. C. Frend, "The Gnostic-Manichaean Tradition in Roman North Africa," *JEH* 4 (1953): 13-26. See also Peter Brown, "The Diffusion of Manichaeism in the Roman Empire," *JRS* 59 (1969): 92-103. Pope Gregory II's concern was that clerics coming from North Africa needed to be examined before becoming bishops, since they could be Manicheans or Donatists (*ep.* 4). Bonner lists the various references to Manichaeism in the west following the fall of the western Roman Empire in *St. Augustine of Hippo*, 3<sup>rd</sup>. ed. (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2002), 191-2. Bonner suggests that despite the repeated use of Gregory II's statement through the eleventh century, it cannot be said that Manichaeism was a continued threat in the west into the eleventh century as some scholars have maintained.

<sup>15</sup> See Bonner, *St. Augustine of Hippo*, 157-75.

exhibited a hierarchical ranking among its followers. Aside from its main division between the “elect” and “hearers,” Manicheans also possessed a clerical hierarchy, which included bishops, presbyters, and deacons.<sup>16</sup> Although they lacked a sacramental system due to their rejection of matter, Manicheans nevertheless participated in various liturgical customs similar to those in Christianity.<sup>17</sup> So attractive was Manichaeism that Augustine himself had spent nine years of his youth as a Manichean hearer before eventually becoming a Catholic Christian.<sup>18</sup>

Once Augustine became a Catholic Christian, he worked towards convincing others away from Manichaeism; following his ordination in 391, his efforts became more sustained and pronounced. Both as a clerical act of protecting his flock as well as a personal motivation of dispelling any suspicion that he still held Manichean beliefs, he devoted the majority of his writings for the next eight years to dismantling the Manichean belief system.<sup>19</sup> Against the metaphysical dualism of the Manicheans, he developed a thoroughgoing psychological explanation for the apparent existence of evil. Augustine’s greatest achievement, however, was exegetical. Manicheans interpreted the Old and New Testament writings through their dualistic worldview; as such, they rejected the whole of the Old Testament because of its emphasis on reproduction and creation, while accepting those portions of the New Testament that conformed to their metaphysical assertions. So

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<sup>16</sup> *haer.* 46.

<sup>17</sup> *util. cred.* 1.2; *mor.* 1.18.34, 2.19.68; *conf.* 4.1.1ff. See also J. Kevin Coyle, “Mani, Manicheism,” in *ATAE*, 524.

<sup>18</sup> See Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 35-49.

<sup>19</sup> Eric Plumer, *Augustine’s Commentary on Galatians: Introduction, Text, Translation, and Notes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 61.

important for Augustine was wresting scriptural interpretation from the Manicheans that, as one modern commentator notes, “everything exegetical in [Augustine] down to 400 at least must be taken as having an anti-Manichean sub-text.”<sup>20</sup> To counter the arguments of the Manicheans, Augustine resorts to an allegorically-dominant reading of the Old Testament in order to demonstrate the unity and necessity of the two testaments.

In defense of the Old Testament, Augustine articulates a historically universal notion of the church in which the people of God extend throughout human history.<sup>21</sup> The Old Testament, for Augustine, should not be read in opposition to the New Testament but as demonstrative of the divine plan for redemption through Christ and the church. He epitomizes this in his treatise *Against Faustus* (ca. 398-400).<sup>22</sup> He asserts that the church, while it became concretely manifest on Pentecost, the activity of the Holy Spirit had been taking place throughout history (via the angels), and those who had attached themselves to holiness, even prior to the Incarnation, have been counted as members of the true church.<sup>23</sup> He locates the beginning of the historical church with Abel due to his fidelity towards God and reads every other event in Jewish history, such as Noah’s ark, to be typologically pointing toward the realization of the church.<sup>24</sup> This exegetical method, which he developed and emphasized during the Manichean polemic, continued

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<sup>20</sup> James J. O’Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), xlix, nt. 97.

<sup>21</sup> David C. Alexander demonstrates that the framework for much of Augustine’s ecclesiology is evident during his pre-clerical years as a Catholic; see *Augustine’s Early Theology of the Church: Emergences and Implications, 386-391* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), esp. 213-6. While a typological reading of the Church is evident prior to his polemic with the Manicheans as a cleric, his Old Testament exegesis of the Church becomes more prominent and developed during this period.

<sup>22</sup> Especially *c. Faust.* 12.8.

<sup>23</sup> *en. Ps.* 128.2; *s.* 4.11; *util. cred.* 14.31, 17.35; *ex. Gal.* 24.13-15.

<sup>24</sup> *en. Ps.* 118.20.1 and 27.2 and *ex. Gal.* 12.14-23.

throughout the rest of his career and influenced his exegetical application of *mater ecclesia*.

## 2. Jovinianism and the Virginal Church

Following his controversy with the Manicheans, Augustine briefly engaged in the Jovinianist controversy. The controversy had already been occurring for almost a decade with its leader, Jovinian, condemned in 393.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, he obtained a substantial following causing enough ascetics to abandon their vows of celibacy and prompting Augustine to write against him in 401: *On the Good of Marriage* and *On Holy Virginit*.<sup>26</sup> Jovinian, according to Jerome, chiefly argued against the growing position that special merit could be gained from ascetical practices and asserted there was no distinction between those who were married and those who were consecrated as virgins.<sup>27</sup> Ambrose, and later Augustine, also report that Jovinian denied the belief that Mary maintained her

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<sup>25</sup> A synod at Rome under Siricius and one at Milan under Ambrose condemned Jovinian. There have been various dates proposed for the condemnation of Jovinian. Most scholars, however, believe the date to be 393, since Jerome's silence of the condemnation in *Against Jovinian*, and his subsequent mention of it in *ep.* 49.2 (394) suggests that he had no knowledge of the condemnation during the writing of *Against Jovinian*, which was certainly written in 393; see, J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings, and Controversies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 182. In 398, Emperors Honorius and Theodosius issued an imperial edict decreeing that Jovinian and his followers were to be flogged and banished to Boa (*cod. Theod.* 16.5.53).

<sup>26</sup> *haer.* 82 and *retr.* 2.22. I am following the traditional dating for these treatises. However, David Hunter offers a persuasive argument for a later dating; see "Augustine, Sermon 354A: Its Place in His Thought on Marriage and Sexuality," *AugStud* 33, no.1 (2002): 40-4, and Pierre-Marie Hombert, *Nouvelles recherches de chronologie augustiniennne* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 2000), 105-36.

<sup>27</sup> Jerome's lists Jovinian's position in four theses in *Adv. Jovinian.* 1.3 (PL 23: 224): "[1] virgines, viduas, et maritatas, quae semel in Christo lotae sunt, si non discrepent caeteris operibus, ejusdem esse meriti.... [2] qui plena fide in baptismate renati sunt, a diabolo non posse subverti.... [3] inter abstinentiam ciborum, et cum gratiarum actione perceptionem eorum, nullam esse distantiam.... [4] esse omnium qui suum baptisma servaverint, unam in regno coelorum remunerationem."

virginity *in partu*.<sup>28</sup> As David Hunter points out, baptism was the “critical category” behind Jovinian’s arguments.<sup>29</sup> Jovinian believed that the emphasis on ascetical superiority threatened the sanctifying role of baptism by shifting the corporate holiness of the church to a hierarchy of individuals. He also feared that the growing ascetical trend possessed Manichean sensibilities and that a theory advancing Mary’s virginity *in partu* was a docetic denial of Christ’s humanity.<sup>30</sup>

Despite his theological and scriptural justifications, Jovinian’s position against the elevated status of virginity, as Peter Brown describes, “touched a raw nerve in the clerical sensibility of his age,” and elicited harsh criticism, especially from Jerome.<sup>31</sup> Jerome perceived Jovinian’s position as fundamentally antinomian and contrary to God’s justice, arguing that it placed a virtuous celibate on the same meritorious level as an adulterer;<sup>32</sup> through an emphasis on 1 Corinthians 7:8, Jerome locates marriage between the virtue of celibacy and the evil of fornication, making marriage a lesser good or a better evil.<sup>33</sup>

Augustine, however, takes a *via media* approach. He refutes the extreme positions of Jovinian and Jerome and argues for both the goodness of marriage and the elevation of

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<sup>28</sup> Ambrose, *ep.* 42.4; Aug., *c. Jul.* 2.2.4. For the development of Marian piety, as well as the most comprehensive study on the Jovinian controversy in English, see David G. Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity: the Jovinianist Controversy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> David G. Hunter, “Helvidius, Jovinian, and the Virginity of Mary in Late Fourth-Century Rome,” *J ECS* 1, no. 1 (1993): 51. See also Hunter, “Jovinian,” *ATAE*, 475-6.

<sup>30</sup> Aug., *c. Jul.* 1.2.4; *nupt. et conc.* 2.15 and *c. Jul. imp.* 4.121-2; Jer., *Adv. Iovinian.* 1.5 and 9. For an excellent overview of the debate, see also David G. Hunter, “Resistance to the Virginal Ideal in Late-Fourth-Century Rome: The Case of Jovinian,” *TS* 48 (1987): 45-65.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 360.

<sup>32</sup> *Adv. Iovinian.* 1.4.

<sup>33</sup> *Adv. Iovinian.* 1.8-9, 12-13.

celibacy. He does so by turning the debate into an ecclesiological one and suggests both roles participate in what only the church as a corporate body possesses: holiness and motherhood. For Augustine, marriage is a participation in the first bond of society, and through its mutual fidelity and the procreation of children mimics the fecundity and unity of the church in a sacramental fashion;<sup>34</sup> however, only the church can function as a spiritual mother, since parents cannot produce Christians physically.<sup>35</sup> Virgins participate in the church's role as the virgin betrothed to Christ (2 Cor 11:2) and embody the eternal incorruptibility through their freedom from sexual relations;<sup>36</sup> virgins can also spiritually participate in the motherhood of the church, as can all Christians who follow the will of God.<sup>37</sup> While virgins physically embody their spiritual participation in the holiness of the church and can function as mothers spiritually, only the church is truly married to Christ and bears consecrated virgins.<sup>38</sup> Whereas Jerome and Ambrose saw virgins as married to Christ, which is evident in their readings of Song of Songs, Augustine, like Jovinian, emphasizes the virgin church as the only spouse of Christ.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *b. conjug.* 1, 3-4, 9, 21.

<sup>35</sup> *virg.* 7.

<sup>36</sup> *virg.* 2 and 54.

<sup>37</sup> *virg.* 5.

<sup>38</sup> *virg.* 2 and 11.

<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Uses of Song of Songs: Origen and the Later Latin Fathers," in *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith: Essays on Late Ancient Christianity*, ed. Elizabeth A. Clark (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1986), 386-427. For Jovinian's understanding of Song of Songs as well as a similar exegetical reading of Psalm 45, see David G. Hunter, "The Virgin, the Bride, and the Church: Reading Psalm 45 in Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine," *ChHist* 69, no. 2 (2000): 281-303.



### 3. Donatism and the Universal/Mixed Church

Coetaneous with involvement in the Jovinianist controversy, Augustine also directed his attention against the Donatists, and in doing so, developed a thoroughgoing ecclesiology in his attempt to rival the Donatist claim of being the true church in North Africa and the only one to offer a valid baptism. When Augustine entered into the debate, the North African church had been in schism for nearly ninety years. The schism originated from the devastating effects of the Diocletian persecution (303-4).<sup>40</sup> As with other preceding persecutions, many Christians, both clerical and lay, failed to uphold the discipline of the church, with many either denying Christ or surrendering sacred texts to the authorities (*traditio*). Consequently, questions concerning the holiness of the church arose once again, but this time they were centered on varied interpretations of Cyprian's ecclesiology. Because Cyprian had located the presence of the Holy Spirit within the unity of the college of bishops, the central concern became focused on the worthiness of clerics who had collaborated with imperial authorities.

This concern turned into an ecclesial conflict with the election of Caecilian as the bishop of Carthage. While Caecilian had a strong support base, some questioned the actions of Caecilian and his predecessor, Mensurius, during the Diocletian persecution.<sup>41</sup>

Those opposing Caecilian argued that his consecration was invalid not only because it

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<sup>40</sup> W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 3-24.

<sup>41</sup> See for instance, *Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs*, 20. However, the date of this document is debated. Maureen A. Tilley keeps with the traditional dating prior to Caecilian's election in 311/2; see *Donatist Martyr Stories: The Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), 25-7 and again in *The Bible in Christian North Africa: The Donatist World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 57-69. Alan Dearn more recently has challenged the early dating, positing the *terminus post quem* of the text to be following the Council of Carthage in 411; see, "The Abitinian Martyrs and the Outbreak of the Donatist Schism," *JEH* 55, no. 1 (2004): 1-18.

bypassed canonical procedure by not involving the Numidian primate but also because it was performed by someone suspected of being a *traditor*. In 312,<sup>42</sup> a group of seventy Numidian bishops led by their episcopal primate, Secundus of Tigisi, declared that Caecilian's consecration was invalid and elected a new bishop, Majorinus, to replace him.<sup>43</sup> Two factions formed between those who supported Caecilian and those who supported Majorinus and his successor, Donatus.

What began as a rivalry between two factions in North Africa became a matter of imperial involvement, which inevitably cemented the division between the two parties. Majorinus and his party petitioned the emperor for imperial recognition, which was necessary for the reception of imperial subsidies. Constantine ordered an investigatory synod to be conducted under the auspices of the Roman bishop Miltiades, which decided in favor of Caecilian (5 Oct. 313). The party of Majorinus, however, quickly appealed on the grounds that Caecilian was deposed by a larger ecclesial council and that Miltiades was unfit to judge the case based on his own connection to *traditores*. In an attempt to pacify the party of Majorinus, the synod of Arles (1 August 314) was convened, which reaffirmed the prior decision of the Roman synod but also forbade the practice of rebaptizing Christians. Believing political machinations affected the decision at Arles, a Donatist delegation appealed to the emperor personally; however, Constantine reaffirmed the authority of the prior synods and decreed that Donatist properties were to be confiscated and its leaders exiled. Donatist leaders refused to comply with the imperial

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<sup>42</sup> I prefer the traditional dating of 311/2 for Caecilian's consecration, as opposed to the early dating of 307/8. For support of later dating, see Frend, *The Donatist Schism*, 11-22 and W. H. C. Frend and K. Clancy, "When did the Donatist Schism Begin?," *JTS* 28 (1977): 104-9. For support of earlier dating, see T. D. Barnes, "The Beginnings of the Donatism," *JTS* 26, no. 1 (1975): 18-20 and A. R. Birley, "Some Notes on the Donatist Schism," *Libyan Studies* 18 (1987): 29-41.

<sup>43</sup> Here and throughout for the Donatist schism, I am largely following Frend, *The Donatist Schism*, 141-68 and Bonner, *St. Augustine of Hippo*, 237-75.

decision, which was met with sporadically severe bouts of imperial coercion, especially in the years of 317 to 321 and 346 to 348.<sup>44</sup>

Violence against the Donatists only strengthened their position that their cause was indeed the correct one. The Donatists, as Maureen A. Tilley demonstrates, understood themselves as a *collecta*, a ritually pure group chosen by God.<sup>45</sup> Although Catholics could point toward unworthy clerics within the Donatist ranks and later to the violence committed by the *circumcellions*, the Donatists understood themselves as the preservers of North African theology and practice.<sup>46</sup> Against the Catholics whom they perceived as persecutors colluding with the imperial government, the Donatists saw their community as the one, true church, and as such, the exclusive possessors of the Holy Spirit. Appealing to Cyprian's baptismal theology, the Donatists insisted that any community other than their own was necessarily impure, and that those in communion with the Catholic Church, since it was in communion with *traditores*, lacked the Holy Spirit and its principal sacrament.<sup>47</sup> Like Cyprian, the Donatists believed that baptisms performed outside of the community were not actual baptisms, and since they had never received the Holy Spirit, anyone converting required another baptism to be received into the community.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> See Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa*, 57-76 and James Alexander, "Count Taurinus and the Persecutors of Donatism," *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 2 (1998): 247-67.

<sup>45</sup> Maureen A. Tilley, "Sustaining Donatist Self-Identity: From the Church of the Martyrs of the *Collecta* of the Desert," *J ECS* 5, no. 1 (1997): 21-35.

<sup>46</sup> Barnes questions the account of Nundinarius, which both Optatus and Augustine relied upon in their denunciations against the Donatists for having *traditores* in their ranks; see "The Beginnings of Donatism," 14-16.

<sup>47</sup> *c. litt. Pet.* 2.25.58.

<sup>48</sup> This did not always hold true, since Donatists did readmit without baptizing those who were baptized in communities that had schismed from their own ranks, such as the Maximianists. Augustine used this

Against the claims of the Donatists, Augustine develops a different ecclesiology from that which had been traditionally espoused in North Africa. He does not rely simply on the notion of a pure or historical church, since the Donatists themselves were claiming themselves to be as such. Building on both Cyprian's and Optatus of Milevis's ecclesiologies,<sup>49</sup> Augustine constructs, as J. Patout Burns states, "a form of church identity which was positive rather than negative, inclusive rather than oppositional."<sup>50</sup> On the one hand, Augustine maintains the Cyprianic notion that outside of the church salvation is not possible. For him, the true church is pure, holy, and one. Yet, on the other hand, he takes seriously the human condition and acknowledges that the temporal/historical church, which, while connected to the true church, nevertheless possesses sinners, as it is comprised of humans in a postlapsarian state. He often uses the parable of the weeds in Matthew 3:24-30 as scriptural evidence for this viewpoint.<sup>51</sup> Augustine separates the church between its temporal/physical phase, which contains both sinners and saints, and its eschatological/spiritual phase, which is comprised only of the perfected communion of saints.<sup>52</sup>

Central to the debate between Augustine and the Donatists was the efficacy of baptism performed in other ecclesial communities. Because the church temporally

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apparent liturgical inconsistency against the Donatists to argue for the universality of baptism (see *bapt.* 1.5.7, and *c. litt. Pet.* 1.11.12).

<sup>49</sup> For Optatus' influence on Augustine, see Robert B. Eno, "The Work of Optatus as a Turning Point in the African Ecclesiology," *The Thomist* 37 (1973): 668-85, and Serge Lancel, *Saint Augustine*, trans. Antonia Nevill (London: SCM Press, 2002), 283.

<sup>50</sup> J. Patout Burns, "Establishing Unity in Diversity," *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 32, no. 4 (2005): 391.

<sup>51</sup> *bapt.* 6.25.48.

<sup>52</sup> *civ. Dei.* 20.9.

included sinners, the sacrament of baptism could not be dependent upon the worthiness of the baptizer or the worthiness of the recipient.<sup>53</sup> He argues that, if the presence of the Holy Spirit, which is required for baptism, is dependent upon the worthiness of an individual, then no one can be sure whether or not they have received an actual baptism; therefore, he concludes that the sacrament must belong to Christ and the church independent of the baptizer. For him, the necessary elements for a valid baptism are water and the proper invocation.<sup>54</sup> The waters of baptism for Augustine are sanctified independent of the minister by the utterance of Matthew 28:19, through which the recipient receives an indelible mark. He repeatedly likens this mark to a military tattoo (*nota militaris*).<sup>55</sup> Just as in the military practice of the time, he argues that the permanency of the mark precludes its repetition and serves as a reminder to whom allegiance is owed.<sup>56</sup>

Although Augustine maintains that baptism exists in heretical and schismatic churches, he makes a distinction between the existence and the effect of the sacrament.<sup>57</sup> Interpreting Matthew 18:18 as referring to the community of saints, Augustine argues that the power of forgiveness belongs exclusively to the church within the bonds of charity. While a baptism can be received outside of the true church, its effects cannot.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *bapt.* 4.10.17.

<sup>54</sup> *bapt.* 3.10.15.

<sup>55</sup> *bapt.* 1.4.5; *c. ep. Parm.* 2.29; *en. Ps.* 39.1; *s.* 260A.2.

<sup>56</sup> For a more thorough analysis of this analogy and its relationship to the Donatist polemic, see my study, "On the Mark: Augustine's Baptismal Analogy of the *Nota Militaris*," *AugStud* 38, no. 2 (2007): 353-63.

<sup>57</sup> *bapt.* 1.14.22 and 19.29; *c. litt. Pet.* 2.35.82; *Jo. ev. tr.* 5.

<sup>58</sup> *bapt.* 5.28.39. It is unclear whether Augustine understands baptism in heretical/schismatic churches to be momentarily efficacious in the forgiveness of sins or not at all due to the separation from the Church; for a strong analysis of the genetic development of Augustine's thought concerning the Holy Spirit in

Using the Petrine typological association of Noah's ark with baptism (1 Peter 3:20-1), Augustine argues that only within the unity of the church is forgiveness possible. Unlike Cyprian and the Donatists, he locates the church not in a local community or college of bishops but in the universal community of saints. As such, anyone outside of the Catholic Church cannot receive the effects of baptism, since their physical separation manifests their internal separation from unity. Physical presence in the Catholic Church did not, however, necessarily guarantee salvation either, since an individual could be separated spiritually from the true church. By separating the existence and efficacy of baptism in such a fashion, Augustine retains the exclusivity of the church and guarantees its perfected holiness in spite of claims made by the Donatists. This notion becomes a central feature in Augustine's use of *mater ecclesia* during this time period.

#### **4. Pelagianism and the Liberating Church**

The Pelagian controversy began around 411/2 and was the final polemic against which Augustine devoted his attention until his death in 430. Pelagianism was a reactive sensibility held by various ascetically-minded proponents who were concerned with what they perceived as an increase in moral laxity stemming from an overemphasis of divine grace.<sup>59</sup> Influenced by Rufinus the Syrian, Pelagius denied the notion of original sin and held that God would not command humans to do what was not within their capacity to perform; otherwise such commands would be meaningless or unjust. Pelagius argued that

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Augustine's baptismal theology, see J. Patout Burns, "Christ and the Holy Spirit in Augustine's Theology of Baptism," in *Augustine: From Rhetor to Theologian*, ed. Joanne McWilliam (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), 161-72.

<sup>59</sup> The strongest study of Augustine and Pelagianism is Eugene TeSelle's, *Augustine the Theologian* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 278-94. See also Bonner, *St. Augustine of Hippo*, 312-93 and Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 340-99.

divine grace consists of granting justification to the unrighteous and providing the capacity and circumstances to will right action for such justification. While Pelagius accepted the custom of infant baptism, he rejected the explanation that it was necessary due to the *aliena peccata* of Adam, since such an explanation made sin involuntarily and diminished the role of the human will in the redemptive process. To Pelagius, this seemed to be a mitigated form of Manichaeism, especially if the contraction of sin were understood in a transducianist fashion, or in an Origenistic way, which was heavily criticized at that time.<sup>60</sup>

Augustine wrote his first anti-Pelagian work, *The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins and the Baptism of Little Ones* (412), almost ten years after Pelagius had been actively arguing his position and gaining a substantial following. One reason he may have delayed his response was his engagement with the Donatists, which had preoccupied him for the last decade and was only coming to a close following the Council of Carthage in 411. Another reason was that Pelagianism did not pose a significant problem for Augustine or other North African clergy until the arrival of Caelestius, Pelagius's disciple, in 411. Pelagianism had been a localized debate in Rome; however, that changed when Caelestius went to Carthage due to Alaric's sacking of Rome in 410. Caelestius held more radical views than Pelagius, arguing among other things that infants were born in the same condition as Adam had been created. Soon after Caelestius was condemned by a council of bishops in Carthage (late 411), Augustine entered the debate, writing against Pelagius and Caelestis, while simultaneously developing his doctrine of operative

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<sup>60</sup> TeSelle, "Pelagius, Pelagianism," in *ATAE*, 633-40.

grace.<sup>61</sup> Augustine continued to debate with Pelagian supporters, most notably Julian of Eclanum, following the formal condemnation of Pelagianism by Pope Zosimus in 418.

While ostensibly centered on the anthropological issue of the human will's participation in redemption, the Pelagian controversy inevitably raised matters of ecclesiology as well. The issue of baptism and its exclusive efficacy had been of central concern in the North African ecclesiological debates for over a hundred and fifty years prior to the Pelagian controversy; it was at the heart of Cyprian's polemics, especially with Stephen, and the Catholic/Donatist debates. Moreover, infant baptisms were becoming more prevalent and accepted as a liturgical custom. Already by 252, infant baptism had become a contentious issue in North Africa. In a letter to the bishop Fidus, Cyprian argues against the position that newborn infants should not be immediately baptized, citing a recent episcopal decision that no one should be denied the grace of God against the contagion created by Adam.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, Augustine responded to various questions surrounding the practice of infant baptism prior to his active involvement in the Pelagian controversy. Sometime in 408, he responded to Boniface's issues concerning how an infant can benefit from baptism through an action performed by someone else's will.<sup>63</sup> Augustine argues that while it is necessary for an infant to be baptized, due to the guilt inherited from original sin, it is not necessary that an infant consciously assent to the reality of baptism to be considered a believer in Christ; rather, because the child is

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<sup>61</sup> For the most complete study on Augustine's doctrine of grace, see J. Patout Burns, *The Development of Augustine's Doctrine of Operative Grace* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1980).

<sup>62</sup> *ep.* 64.2 and 5. G. W. Clarke locates the council in question to the spring of 252; see, *Letters* 3, 302-3.

<sup>63</sup> *ep.* 98.10. The date of this letter is disputed as to whether it should be assigned to 408 or during the Pelagian controversy in 413/414. See T. J. van Bavel, "Augustine on Baptism: Letter 98," *Augustinian Heritage* 39 (1993): 191-212.



cognitively unable, the faith of the church is bestowed upon the infant until they reach an age of understanding. As Everett Ferguson notes, when Augustine entered into the Pelagian controversy he used the same doctrine of baptism developed in the Donatist polemic but reapplied it to infants.<sup>64</sup> Thus, the Pelagian position concerning human freedom was not merely a point of theological debate as it was in Rome, but for North Africans, it touched on a sensitive nerve by questioning a doctrine and practice central to their ecclesiological understanding.

For Augustine, the sacrament of baptism and the church is necessary and efficacious in the salvation of an individual. In *The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins and the Baptism of Little Ones*, his first treatise against the Pelagians (ca. 411/12), Augustine reasons against the Pelagians that if baptism is necessary for spiritual regeneration from sin, and infants are customarily baptized, then they must be regenerated from some kind of deficiency, or the action is not only superfluous but also problematic since baptism is unrepeatable.<sup>65</sup> Thus, the guilt from Adam's sin must be transmitted somehow to all humans. To further demonstrate this point, he argues that the form of baptism, in particular the ritual of exorcism, along with the testimonies from Scripture (Nicodemus) and other patristic writers (Cyprian and Ambrose), prove the necessity of infant baptism.<sup>66</sup> The teaching and the practice of the church, according to Augustine, all point to the conclusion that infants, like all humans, also need to be liberated from the corporate condition of damnation that originated with Adam and Eve.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 807-16.

<sup>65</sup> *pecc. mer.* 2.27.43. See also *gr. et pecc. or.* 2.39.44-5 and 40.44-45.

<sup>66</sup> *pecc. mer.* 1.30.58-31.60, 1.34.63, 3.5.10; *s.* 294.10, 19; *gr. et pecc. or.* 1.42.46-50.55, 2.41.47.

<sup>67</sup> *pecc. mer.* 1.10.11-1.13.16; *gr. et pecc. or.* 2.40.45; *nupt. et conc.* 2.5.14.

The church with its initiatory rite of baptism functions as the place of liberation, offering a rebirth into freedom through the power of the Holy Spirit. As with the Donatist controversy, he applied these concerns in his use of *mater ecclesia*.

### **Augustine's Use of Mater Ecclesia**

#### **1. The Mother of the Living, the Mother of Christ**

##### ***Mother Church and Eve***

Augustine utilized and expounded upon the tradition set by Tertullian of understanding the Church as the new Eve. Although he used this typological image throughout his entire career, it was especially useful in his defense of the Old Testament against the Manicheans, who understood Adam and Eve to be by-products of the war between the Kingdom of Light and the Kingdom of Dark, creations of demonic parents for the purpose of confining the particles of light through sexual reproduction.<sup>68</sup> Rather than locate evil as a created thing, which threatens the omnibenevolence and omnipotence of the divine, Augustine argues that evil was the direct result of Adam and Eve's moral failing. The result was Adam and Eve being moved from a state of immortality to one of mortality, coupled with the inability to control the desires of the flesh and other gendered consequences; Eve individually, and women corporately, received the particular penalties of birth pangs and marital submission.<sup>69</sup> Later in his career, Augustine also added the penalty of inherited guilt as part of this legacy.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *mor.* 2.19.73.

<sup>69</sup> *Gn. adv. Man.* 2.19.29.

<sup>70</sup> *pecc. mer.* 2.22.36. Scholars disagree on when precisely Augustine's more mature doctrine of original sin began. For three different views see, P. Rigby, *Original Sin in Augustine's Confessions* (Ottawa: Ottawa

Augustine argues that only after these spiritual and physical punishments are incurred does Adam ironically give Eve the name “Life.”<sup>71</sup> Reading Genesis 3:20 along with 1 Timothy 5:6 (“but the widow who lives for pleasure is dead even while she lives”), Augustine interprets Eve’s appellation, “the mother of the living,” as meaning Eve is the mother of all humans who are from that point born into a mortal, sinful state. However, by combining Ephesians 5:31-2 and Genesis 2:24, he also reads the name typologically as prophetically referring to the church: “Adam prefigured Christ, and Eve prefigured the Church, which is why she was called the mother of the living.”<sup>72</sup>

Mother Church, for Augustine, functions as the new Eve who recapitulates the failings of the first mother:<sup>73</sup>

Because two parents got us unto death, two parents have gotten us into life. The parents who got unto death are Adam and Eve. The parents who have gotten us unto life are Christ and the Church. My own father who begot me was Adam for me, and my own mother was Eve for me.<sup>74</sup>

While the first mother brought about death and is the mother of those living in death/sin, the new mother, the church, is the mother of the spiritually living.<sup>75</sup> Like Tertullian, Augustine understands the origin of Eve to signify the origin of the church. In *Homilies*

University Press, 1987), TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian*, and J. Patout Burns, *The Development of Augustine’s Doctrine of Operative Grace*.

<sup>71</sup> *Gn. adv. Man.* 2.21.31. Trans. Hill, *NCP I/13*, 92.

<sup>72</sup> *en. Ps.* 40.10 (CCSL 38:456.16-18): “Adam in figura Christi, Eua in figura ecclesiae; unde est appellata mater uiuorum” (Trans. Boulding, *NCP III/16*, 235). See also *c. Faust.* 12.8; *nupt. et conc.* 2:12; *Gn. litt.* 11.51.

<sup>73</sup> Augustine occasionally presents paradise as the precursor to the Church (*Gn. litt.* 11.54).

<sup>74</sup> *s.* 22.10 (CCSL 41:300.265-269): “quia duo parentes nos genuerunt ad mortem, duo parentes nos genuerunt ad uitam. parentes qui nos genuerunt ad mortem, Adam est et Eua. parentes qui nos genuerunt ad uitam, Christus est et ecclesia. et pater meus qui me genuit, Adam mihi fuit; et mater mea Eua mihi fuit” (Trans. Hill, *NCP III/2*, 47-8).

<sup>75</sup> *s.* 56.14.

on the *Gospel of John*, he states, “Adam sleeps so that Eve can be made; Christ dies so that the Church can be made. While Adam is asleep Eve is made from his side; when Christ is dead his side is pierced with a lance, so that the sacraments, from which the Church is to be formed, might pour out.”<sup>76</sup> Just as Eve came from Adam and brought about death, the death of the new Adam created the new Eve through which a new inheritance of life was granted.

While Eve’s motherhood extends to all humans, Augustine sees the church’s motherhood and inheritance to be limited to those children who are baptized and persevere in the unity, teaching, and discipline of the Catholic Church. Given his corporate notion of not only the fall but also the church itself, he asserts that all Christians can and should become spiritual mothers through the church:

You became children, become mothers too. You were the mother’s children when you were baptized, then you were born as members of Christ. Bring whomever you can along to the bath of baptism, so that just as you became children when you were born, you may likewise be able, by bringing others to be born, to become mothers of Christ as well.<sup>77</sup>

For Augustine, each member is able to participate in the motherhood of the church and act as a spiritual mother by functioning as the instrument for the conversion of others, just as Monica had done for him. However, Christians can just as easily act as Eve. In his letter to Laetius (*ep.* 243), a monk who left the monastery seemingly at his mother’s prompting after his father had died, Augustine attempts to convince Laetius to reject the

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<sup>76</sup> *Jo. ev. tr.* 9.10 (CCSL 36:96.33-36): “dormit Adam ut fiat Eua; moritur Christus ut fiat ecclesia. dormienti Adae fit Eua de latere; mortuo Christo lancea percutitur latus ut profluant sacramenta, quibus formetur ecclesia” (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/12, 191-2). See also *en. Ps.* 40.10; *Gn. adv. Man.* 2.24.37; *c. Faust.* 12.8; *civ. Dei* 22.17).

<sup>77</sup> Sermon Denis 25 (*s.* 72A).8 (MA 1:164.11-15): “fuistis filii, estote et matres. filii matris, quando baptizati estis, tunc membra Christi nata estis: adducite ad lauacrum baptismatis quos potestis; ut, sicut filii fuistis quando nati estis, sic etiam ducendo ad nascendum matres Christi esse possitis” (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/3, 289).

carnal calling he felt from his biological mother and return to the spiritual one from the church. Augustine advises Laetius to avoid the temptations of Eve, whether it is a mother or wife, and further depicts Laetius' love for his biological mother over his love for the church as covering himself with the leaves that Adam and Eve used to hide their shame.<sup>78</sup> For Augustine, just as any Christian could act as Mother Church, they could also act as her antitype, Eve, by pulling away members from spiritual pursuits.<sup>79</sup>

### ***Mother Church and Mary***

Augustine's precise understanding of the Mary-church relationship is complex and not always presented consistently. As a result, scholars vary in their interpretation of it.<sup>80</sup> Some scholars emphasize Mary's role as the new Eve in Augustine's thought and portray the church as subsidiary to his Mary-Eve typology; such presentations, however, fail to recognize his predominant use of a Church-Eve typology.<sup>81</sup> Other scholars maintain the opposite, arguing that he understood Mary as just another member of the church and rarely relied on a Mary-Eve typology; this viewpoint, however, tends to ignore the close parallels Augustine drew between Mary and the church.<sup>82</sup> Maureen A. Tilley offers a developmental solution that is a synthesis of the first two viewpoints.

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<sup>78</sup> *ep.* 243.10.

<sup>79</sup> Augustine also uses Job's wife (Job 2:9-10) as an Eve figure (*ymb. cat.* 10).

<sup>80</sup> This discussion is conspicuously absent in Bavel, "Church," in *ATAE*, 169-75 and only briefly mentioned in Emilien Lamirande, "Ecclesia," in *Augustinus-Lexicon*, vol. 2, ed. Cornelius Mayer (Basel: Schwabe, 2001), 687-718.

<sup>81</sup> Kim Power, *Veiled Desire: Augustine on Women* (New York: Continuum, 1996), 182-9; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 407; to a lesser extent, G. Bonner, "The Figure of Eve in Augustine's Theology," *SP* 33 (1997): 33.

<sup>82</sup> Eno, "Mary and Her Role in Patristic Theology," 174; Daniel E. Doyle, "Mary, Mother of God," *ATAE*, 544.

Tilley posits that, while Augustine initially subordinated Mary within the church as simply another member, he eventually made Mary a prototype of the eschatological church, and he finally displaced the church with Mary as the individual and corporate model for its members.<sup>83</sup> Although Tilley's solution avoids the pitfalls of the first two, the evidence does not suggest the stepwise progression that she advocates.<sup>84</sup> The present investigation proposes a fourth position. It will be argued that Augustine attempted to merge two different traditions, which resulted in an unresolved tension between his Mariology and ecclesiology that continued throughout his career.

Traditionally, the church in North Africa occupied a more prominent soteriological role than did Mary in its theology and devotion. Tertullian deviated from Irenaeus's typological understanding and portrayed the church, not Mary, as the new Eve. As Tilley notices, Cyprian applied the word *genetrix* to the church alone.<sup>85</sup> Moreover, there were no designated Marian feasts on the North African liturgical calendar,<sup>86</sup> and Mary was never assigned an intercessory function like that of the martyrs.<sup>87</sup> Like his North African predecessors, Augustine early in his career preferred to create a

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<sup>83</sup> Tilley, "Mary in Roman Africa," 123-5.

<sup>84</sup> Tilley ("Mary in Roman Africa," 123) cites the same source (*s.* 72A) for both stages 1 and 2, which counters her portrayal of discrete developmental stages and suggests Augustine from an early stage had a muddled notion concerning the relationship between Mary and the church. She also uses *s.* 189 (ca. 410) and 192 (ca. 412) as evidence for stage 3, but these are written before *s.* 72A (397). For dating, see Hill, *NCP* III/3, 280 nt. 1; *NCP* III/6, 36 nt. 1; *NCP* III/6, 48 nt. 1.

<sup>85</sup> Tilley, "Mary in Roman Africa: Evidence for her Cultus," *SP* 40 (2006): 122. See *unit.* 4 and *ep.* 69.2.1; Cyprian understands Song of Songs 6:8 and its use of *genetrix* in reference to the church.

<sup>86</sup> For the lack of Marian piety in North Africa, see Robert B. Eno, "Mary and Her Role in Patristic Theology," in *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary*, ed. H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, and Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 173.

<sup>87</sup> The Wedding at Cana (Jn 2:1-11) is often used to support the notion of Mary's intercessory role; however, Augustine in his exposition of the passage makes no mention such notion (*Jo. ev. tr.* 8). See also George P. Lawless, "The Wedding at Cana: Augustine on the Gospel According to John Tractates 8 and 9," *AugStud* 28, no. 2 (1997), 35-80.

typological association between the church and Eve (s. 22.10) and avoided making any parallel between Mary and the church.<sup>88</sup>

Augustine first pairs Mary with the church during his brief polemic with the Jovinianists in 401. In his defense of virginity, he appeals to Mary as the only physically and spiritually fecund virgin. In *On Virginity*, he states,

Mary gave birth physically to the head of the body; the Church gives birth spiritually to that head's members. In both, virginity is no obstacle to fertility; in both, fertility does not extinguish virginity. The Church as a whole is holy both physically and spiritually, but she is not physically a virgin as a whole, though she is spiritually.<sup>89</sup>

Augustine portrays the church and Mary as he does married Christians and consecrated virgins: all Christians are able to participate spiritually in the holiness and maternity of the church, while physical virginity is restricted to Mary and consecrated virgins.<sup>90</sup> The church in its unity is seen as both physically and spiritually holy and, through its generative powers of baptism and reconciliation, functions as the spiritual mother of Christians. Mary is physically and spiritually a virgin, as well as physically and spiritually a mother by birthing the head of church and by being a member of it. Although Augustine's analogy drawn between the church/married and Mary/virgins is apt for his purpose of defending the superiority of virginity while maintaining the goodness of marriage, it is problematic concerning his overall ecclesiology, since Mary is seemingly

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<sup>88</sup> When Augustine talks about Christ's "mother of the flesh" in relation to the spiritual mother, the Church, he is not referring to Mary; rather in a Pauline fashion, he identifies the carnal mother as Jerusalem (c. *Faust.* 22.39 and *Jo. ev. tr.* 9.10).

<sup>89</sup> *uirg.* 2.2 (CSEL 41:263.19-24): "Maria corporaliter caput huius corporis peperit, ecclesia spiritaliter membra illius capitis parit. in utraque uirginitas fecunditatem non impedit, in utraque fecunditas uirginitatem non adimit. proinde cum ecclesia uniuersa sit sancta et corpore et spiritu, nec tamen uniuersa sit corpore uirgo, sed spiritu" (Trans. Kearney, *NCP I/9*, 68-9).

<sup>90</sup> *uirg.* 8.8; cf. *b. conjug.* 18.21, 23.28-31.

placed above the church through her spiritual and physical embodiment of both virginity and maternity.<sup>91</sup>

Augustine seems to have been aware of this potential ecclesiological problem, since he repeats the assertion that Mary is a spiritual mother through her assent to the will of God as a member of the church.<sup>92</sup> However, his attempt at maintaining the Church's superiority is tortuous, and it ultimately fails to resolve the tension created between the two female figures. His use of such a difficult analogy can best be understood as the merger of two different traditions: a maternal/associative ecclesiology and a virginal/ascetical ecclesiology that upheld Mary as a paradigm. The former was predominant in North Africa. The latter, however, was burgeoning in the late fourth century as part of the growing emphasis on Mary and her virginity. Ambrose of Milan, for instance, emphasizes the virginity of Mary and the church within the process of salvation and creates an ascetical link between ecclesiology and Mariology.<sup>93</sup> Like Jerome, Ambrose endorses an ascetical hierarchy within the church and equates it with virginity; he believes, for instance, that virgins are married to Christ and sexual relations are the result of Adam and Eve's transgression.<sup>94</sup> For Ambrose, Mary functions as the physical embodiment of the church, which is like her untainted and fecund.<sup>95</sup> Augustine in his *via media* approach to the Jovinian controversy maintains the North African

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<sup>91</sup> *virg.* 6.6.

<sup>92</sup> *virg.* 5.5 and 6.6.

<sup>93</sup> Hunter, *Marriage, Celibacy, and Heresy in Ancient Christianity*, 197-204.

<sup>94</sup> *virg.* 1.7.36-7; *virgin.* 6.33; *exh. virg.* 6.36.

<sup>95</sup> *virg.* 1.31; *Luc.* 2.7, 55-7. Ambrose was the first to call Mary a type for the church; see, Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 84-5. See also C. W. Neumann, *The Virgin Mary in the Works of St. Ambrose* (Fribourg: Paradosis, 1962).



emphasis on the church's preeminence, which addressed the Jovinianist concerns, while advocating the superiority of virginity and its corresponding Mariology, which was maintained by Ambrose.

Once Augustine associated Mary and the church, he continued to pair the two figures. He especially found it helpful for elucidating the union of human and divine in the Incarnation. In *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 8 (ca. 406-7) and *Sermon* 147A (ca. 409-10), he refers to Mary's womb as the bridal chamber where Christ/spirit and the church/flesh were wedded together, fulfilling Genesis 2:24 ("Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh").<sup>96</sup> Again in a Christmas homily delivered in 411/12, he states, "the only-begotten Son of God was pleased to join human nature to himself, in order to link to himself as undefiled head an undefiled Church."<sup>97</sup> He even likens the gestation of Christ's physical body to baking bread in Mary's womb, a Eucharistic analogy that he also applies to describe the formation of members in the church.<sup>98</sup>

Augustine describes Mary and the church in similar terms and ascribes to them similar attributes. He understands Mary and the church both as fecund-virginal mothers whose offspring together form the *totus Christus*; Mary physically gave birth to the head of the church, while the church continues to bear the Body of Christ spiritually. Both the church and Mary, for Augustine, functioned as models for consecrated virgins<sup>99</sup> and the

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<sup>96</sup> *Jo. ev. tr.* 8.4 and *s.* 147A.2.

<sup>97</sup> *s.* 191.3 (PL 38:1010): "illic namque unigenitus dei filius humanam sibi dignatus est coniungere naturam, ut sibi capiti immaculato immaculatam consociaret ecclesiam" (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/6, 43). Augustine also may have inherited this notion from Ambrose as well, see Graef, *Mary*, 85.

<sup>98</sup> *s.* 360C.5.

<sup>99</sup> *virg.* 2.2 and 2.4.

faithful.<sup>100</sup> Like Ambrose,<sup>101</sup> he assigns Mary a recapitulating role in the history of salvation and argues against the position that it was unfitting for Christ to be born of woman; rather, he asserts that just as man fell through a woman, humanity must be restored through one.<sup>102</sup> He also parallels Mary with Eve in his *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 10:

However, she was called woman because of her female sex, not because of a corruption of purity, and this follows the language of Scripture itself. For Eve, having immediately been made from the side of her husband and not yet touched by him, was also called woman.<sup>103</sup>

Augustine's understanding of Mary, as an integral figure in the recapitulation of Eve's failure, introduced in North African theology an Eve-Mary-Church typology.

As in *On Virginity*, the association between Mary and the church created a tension within his ecclesiology, which he was never able to fully resolve. In some instances, he presents Mary as a type and model for the church, almost elevating Mary above the church.<sup>104</sup> In *Sermon* 188 (ca. 410-20), he goes so far as to make the church an imitator of Mary:

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<sup>100</sup> s. 188.2.4, 189.3.3, 191.4.

<sup>101</sup> *Luc.* 4.7 and *Ps.* 118 2.8.

<sup>102</sup> s. 51.3.

<sup>103</sup> *Jo. ev. tr.* 10.2 (CCSL 36:101.14-17): "dicta est autem mulier secundum femineum sexum, non secundum corruptionem integritatis, et hoc ex lingua ipsius scripturae. nam et Eua statim facta de latere uiri sui, nondum contacta a uiro suo, nostis quia mulier appellata est" (Trans. author). Augustine, however, is sometimes more concerned with Mary being in the line of Adam for her recapitulating role (s. 189.3) as "the mother of the weakness, which he took on for our sakes" (*Jo. ev. tr.* 8.9). It is possible that Augustine understood Mary and the church to confer life and reverse the effects of Eve but each having different roles within this process (i.e. Mary's maternity is a symbol for the end of physical penalties ascribed to women, which will only occur in salvation, while the church's maternity eradicates the spiritual penalties presently).

<sup>104</sup> s. 191.3; cf. s. 192.2, and 213.8; *ench.* 34.

Christ, intending to establish the Church's virginity in the heart, first preserved Mary in the body...the Church on the other hand could not be a virgin unless she had found that the husband she had been given to was the son of a virgin.<sup>105</sup>

Mary is the prototype that the church imitates, and just as in *On Virginity*, the church can only spiritually participate in the fecund-virginity that Mary embodied perfectly.

In other instances, however, Augustine downplays Mary's role with respect to the church. In *Sermon 65A* (ca. 414-8), Augustine rhetorically asks his congregation, "Who gave you birth? You answer, 'Mother Church.' How can the Church not be the mother of Christ, seeing that it gives birth to the members of Christ?"<sup>106</sup> Here, he emphasizes the church's role in the parturition of members in the spiritual Body of Christ. He likewise asserts in *Sermon 72A* (ca. 417-8) that Mary is herself only a member and lesser than the church:

It means more for Mary to have been a disciple of Christ than to have been the mother of Christ...Mary is holy, Mary is blessed, but the Church is something greater than the Virgin Mary. Why? Because Mary is part of the Church, a holy member, a quite exceptional member, the supremely wonderful member, but still a member of the whole body.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> s. 188.4 (PL 38:1005): "uirginitatem proinde Christus ecclesiae facturus in corde, prius Mariae seruauit in corpore. humano quippe coniugio sponso femina traditur, ut uirgo iam non sit: ecclesia uero uirgo esse non posset, nisi sponsum cui traderetur, filium uirginis inuenisset" (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/6, 33).

<sup>106</sup> Serm Etaix 1 (s. 65A.7) (*RB* 86:45.137-139): interrogo uos, o membra Christi: quae uos peperit? respondetis: mater ecclesia. Quomodo non est mater ecclesia Christi quae parit membra Christi?" (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/3, 202). There is a dispute concerning the dating of this sermon (see 206 nt. 1). Hill prefers to date this sermon early to 397/8 because it "vividly" echoes the Confessions 8. I side with the later dating proposed by Étaix given the sermon's parallels with *civ. Dei* 15.22 and inclusion of predestination; see R. Étaix, "Sermon inédit de saint Augustin sur l'amour des parents," *RB* 86 (1976), 41-8.

<sup>107</sup> Serm Denis 25(s. 72A).7 (MA 1:162.19-20, 163.3-6): "et ideo plus est Mariae, discipulam fuisse Christi, quam matrem fuisse Christi...sancta Maria, beata Maria, sed melior est ecclesia quam uirgo Maria. quare? quia Maria portio est ecclesiae, sanctum membrum, excellens membrum, supereminens membrum, sed tamen totius corporis membrum. si totius corporis, plus est profecto corpus quam membrum" (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/3, 287).

For Augustine, Mary was only a spiritual mother by participating in the will of God, a motherhood in which all Christians are able to participate according to Matthew 12:50.<sup>108</sup>

Moreover, he repeatedly asserts that only the church bore virgins and martyrs.<sup>109</sup>

Although Mary is considered exceptional in her role, Augustine clarifies that she is still lesser than the church in its totality and in need of its redemption.<sup>110</sup>

## 2. The Mother of All Christians

Donatists perceived themselves as the true inheritors of the uncorrupted holy church, free from the contagion of idolatry, whereas Catholics, they maintained, were the corporate inheritors of sin through their unbroken succession from *traditores*, which was demonstrated and further compounded by their collaboration with a persecutory state. Because the Donatists argued that only their church was the pure church, they too utilized the maternal metaphor for describing their community. In *A Sermon on the Passion of Saints Donatus and Advocatus*, written sometime during the repression of the Donatists between 317 and 321, the anonymous author ends the account with an encomium to *mater ecclesia*.<sup>111</sup> The Donatists considered their preservation of purity and experienced

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<sup>108</sup> s. 72A.7-8 and *ep.* 243.

<sup>109</sup> *virg.* 11.12 and s. 191.3, 317.6.

<sup>110</sup> Julian of Eclanum accused Augustine of being worse than Jovinian, since the latter only denied her *virginitas in partu* whereas Augustine's doctrine of original sin handed her over to the Devil (*c. Jul. imp.* 4.122). While Augustine believed that all humans, except Jesus, were subject to sin (*pecc. mer.* 2.20.34), he did not deny that Mary was sinless, but he explicitly avoided the discussion (*nat. et gr.* 36.42).

<sup>111</sup> 14, cf. 1. See Maureen A. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories: The Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), 60. See also Tyconius, *lib. reg.* 3.25; here, Tyconius applies Paul's reading of the Abraham and Sarah story (Gal. 4:21-5:1) to the pure community among the Donatists.

struggle to indicate that they were the real children of Mother Church, not the Catholics.<sup>112</sup>

Likewise, Donatists perceived oppositional parties within their own ranks as schismatics and accordingly used the maternal metaphor against them. When a division occurred between those who supported Primian, the newly elected Donatist bishop of Carthage, and those who supported Maximinian, Primian's deacon who contested his election, a council of Donatist bishops at Bagai (394) decreed that Maximinian and his supporters were to be excommunicated as schismatics. Charges against the Maximinianists echo Cyprian's indictment against schismatics, as the Maximinianists were deemed enemies of Mother Church,<sup>113</sup> and were likened to Core, Dathan, and Abiron who rebelled against Aaron's exclusive priestly authority (Num 16:1-40) due to their violation of the church's bosom of peace.<sup>114</sup> Like Cyprian, the bishops at Bagai urged schismatics to relinquish their support for Maximinian and return to Mother Church.<sup>115</sup>

Augustine also found the concept of Mother Church a useful metaphor against the Donatists whom he perceived to be schismatics. From the very onset of his polemic with Donatism, Augustine relies heavily on the motherhood of the church to counter their claim of being the true church. In *Psalm against the Donatists*, his earliest anti-Donatist work (ca. late 393), he attempts to reach a wider audience by composing a polemical

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<sup>112</sup> Aug. *bapt.* 1.10.13 and *ps. c. Don.* 277.

<sup>113</sup> *unit.* 18, *ep.* 3.1.2, 67.3.2, 69.8.1 and 9.1-2, 73.8.1-2.

<sup>114</sup> Aug. *Cresc.* 3.22, 3.24, 3.59, 4.2, 4.5, 4.38, 4.44; *Emer.* 10; *ep.* 108.5 and 13.

<sup>115</sup> Aug, *Cresc.* 3.20-1, 3.60, 4.6, 4.39, 4.41-2, 4.45; *c. Gaud.* 2.7; *Emer.* 11.

song, just as the Donatist Parmenian had done earlier.<sup>116</sup> Although some scholars have not regarded this work highly, Carl P. E. Springer has demonstrated that Augustine's inclusion of a *prosopopoeia* of the church as a mother makes the *Psalm against the Donatists* "a more sophisticated literary composition."<sup>117</sup> Indeed, Augustine is the first patristic writer to give a voice to *mater ecclesia*, thus further elevating her personification.<sup>118</sup> In the voice of Mother Church, he writes,

O my sons, what do you find wrong with your mother? Now I wish to hear from you, why have you deserted me? You have blamed your brothers, and I am wounded deeply. When outside peoples were pressing down upon me, I bore many with anguish. Many deserted me, but they did so in fear; truly nothing compelled you, and so you rebelled against me. You say that you are with me, but you see that is untrue. I am consecrated Catholic, and you are from the party of Donatus. The apostle Paul prescribed me to pray for the rulers of the world; you look unfavorably [at me] that rulers are now in the Christian faith. If you are my children, why are you resentful? Is it because they hear my prayers? For when they sent gifts, you were unwilling to accept them, and you defiled the prophets who foretold that great rulers of the Gentiles would send gifts to the Church. When you rejected those gifts, you yourselves declared them not to be, and you drove Macarius to avenge his pain. What have I, your mother [spread throughout] the whole world, done against you? I drive out the sinners whom I am able; those whom I am not able, I bring them together [in the Church] to support them. I support them while they are healed or until they are separated in the end of times. Why have you detached yourselves from me? I am crucified by your death. If you detest sinners so much, look at how many you have. And if you are going to tolerate sinners, why not do so in the unity [of the Church], where no one rebaptizes and altar is not against altar? You tolerate so many sinners, but

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<sup>116</sup> *retr.* 2.20.19.

<sup>117</sup> Carl P. E. Springer, "The *prosopopoeia* of Church as Mother in Augustine's *Psalmus contra Partem Donati*," *AugStud* 18 (1987): 52. See also by the same author, "The Artistry of Augustine's *Psalmus contra Partem Donati*," *AugStud* 16 (1985): 65-74 and Daniel J. Nodes, "The Organization of Augustine's *Psalmus contra Partem Donati*," *VigChr* 63, no. 4 (2009): 390-408.

<sup>118</sup> Augustine understood Mother Church to be speaking in Galatians 4:19 and 1 Thessalonians 2:7 (*ex. Gal* 38:1-2), but did not himself develop her voice until his polemic with the Donatists.

not with any merit because what you owe to Christ you wish to offer to Donatus.<sup>119</sup>

The speech of *mater ecclesia* encompasses the bulk of Augustine's maternally-imagined arguments that he raises throughout the Donatist polemic: 1) Mother Church is Catholic, while the Donatists are unruly children deserving of correction; 2) Mother Church is comprised of the saints but is temporally mixed among sinners; 3) Mother Church is singular, thus making rebaptism unnecessary. Just as he denies the Donatist claim of being the true inheritors of Cyprian, he also attacks their claim of being the only true children of Mother Church by utilizing and creatively extending the central ecclesial metaphor in North Africa.

### ***Rebellious Children***

Augustine believed that the numerical and geographical spread of the Catholic Church signified that it was the true church, while Donatism, because it was mainly limited to North Africa, demonstrably acted contrary to the unity of the church.<sup>120</sup> To illustrate his point, he likens the Donatists to unruly children rebelling against their

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<sup>119</sup> *ps. c. Don. 270-94 (RB 47:312-330)*: "et dicat: o filii mei, quid querimini de matre? quare me deseruistis, iam uolo a uobis audire. accusatis fratres uestros et ego laceror ualde. quando me premebant gentes, multa tuli cum dolore. multi me deseruerunt, sed fecerunt in timore; uos uero nullus coegit sic contra me rebellare. dicitis me cum uos esse, sed falsum uidetis esse. ego catholica dicor et uos de donati parte. iussit me apostolus paulus pro regibus mundi orare; uos inuidetis quod reges iam sunt in christiana fide. si filii estis, quid doletis, quia audite sunt praecepta mea? quando enim dona miserunt noluitis acceptare et obliti estis prophetas, qui illud praedixerunt ante, quod gentium reges magni missuri essent dona ecclesiae. quae dona cum respuistis, ostendistis uos non esse et macharium coegistis suum dolorem uindicare. sed ego quid uobis feci, mater uestra in toto orbe? expello malos quos possum, quos non possum cogor ferre. fero illos, donec sanentur, aut separentur in fine. uos me quare dimisistis et crucior de uestra morte? si multum malos odistis, quales habetis uidete. si et uos toleratis malos, quare non in unitate, ubi nemo rebaptizat nec altare est contra altare? malos tantos toleratis, sed nulla bona mercede, quia quod debetis pro christo, pro donato uultis ferre" (Trans. author).

<sup>120</sup> Augustine's argument, while it seems solidly convincing, oversimplifies the issue. Not only were the Donatists able to claim influence and spread outside of North Africa to counter this argument (Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories*, xvi), but also in regard to the Catholic argument concerning unity, Donatists did not find it compelling and perceived it as another Catholic excuse for allowing impurities into the church (see *A Sermon on the Passions of Saints Donatus and Advocatus*, 5).

spiritual mother.<sup>121</sup> He parallels their spiritual rebellion to an incident that occurred between a mother and son in another church. There, a young Catholic man had acted violently against his mother, and when his bishop rebuked him, he converted to the Donatist church. Concerning the young man, now-turned Donatist, Augustine states,

A mother according to the flesh is struck in the members by which she bore and nourished her ungrateful child; our spiritual mother, the Church, forbids this, and she is struck in the sacraments by which she bore and nourished her ungrateful child.<sup>122</sup>

For Augustine, the problem with the rebellious/Donatist children is that they did not just affect their own salvation but the salvation of other children within Mother Church.<sup>123</sup> In his exposition of Psalm 10, he says that Donatists “struggle to turn us aside and tear us away from the breasts of the one Church, the true mother, asserting that Christ is with them.”<sup>124</sup>

Just as rebellious children require correction, according to Augustine, spiritually rebellious children deserve the same. Even at the onset of his anti-Donatist activity, he asserts that the Donatists were deserving of coercion from the state. In the *Psalm against the Donatists*, he reminds the Donatists of the slaughter they incurred from the imperial soldiers (346) at Bagai after some within their ranks had violently blocked the imperial

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<sup>121</sup> *en. Ps.* 130.

<sup>122</sup> *ep.* 34.3 (CSEL 34.2:24.9-12): “caeditur mater carnalis in membris, quibus genuit et nutriuit ingratum; prohibet hoc ecclesia, mater spiritalis; caeditur et ipsa in sacramentis, quibus genuit et nutriuit ingratum” (Trans. Teske, *NCP* II/1, 119).

<sup>123</sup> *ep.* 243.8.

<sup>124</sup> *en. Ps.* 10.1 (CCSL 38:74.6-8): “ab unius ecclesiae uerae matris uberibus nos auertere atque abripere moliantur, adfirmantes quod apud ipsos sit Christus” (Trans. Boulding, *NCP* III/15, 160).



assessors, Paul and Macarius, from distributing alms to the poor.<sup>125</sup> Despite his approval of state action against the Donatists, Augustine at this time did not advocate imperial coercion of the Donatists as a means of effecting unity between the two churches. In a letter to the Catholic official Eusebius in 396/7, Augustine states that he would not accept anyone into the Catholic Church unless it was by their own free will, due to a fear of having false members in his church joining to avoid imperial penalties.<sup>126</sup> Like a maternal version of the Prodigal Son, he portrays the church as a forgiving mother waiting for her wayward children to return home to her welcoming bosom.<sup>127</sup>

Starting around 407, however, Augustine begins to justify the use of imperial assistance in coercing ecclesial unity in North Africa. In explaining the reason for his changed position, he says that, despite the initial impetus of avoiding imperial penalty, he had witnessed many former Donatists truly convert to Catholicism once they were physically present in the Catholic Church.<sup>128</sup> His attitudinal change coincided with a significant increase of imperially assisted anti-Donatist activity.<sup>129</sup> Donatism had reached its peak at the end of the fourth century, culminating with the alliance between the

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<sup>125</sup> Augustine bases his understanding of these events on Optatus of Milevis's account (*de schism. Don.* 3.3-8), but the Donatists remembered the events quite differently (*Martyrdom of Marculus*, 3 and *Passion of Maxim Ian and Isaac*, 13-16).

<sup>126</sup> *ep.* 35.4; cf. *ep.* 93.5.17 and *c. litt. Pet.* 2.83.184.

<sup>127</sup> Augustine also compared Donatists to a precious stone having shaken itself loose from the church's necklace (*s.* 37.3 in 410) and sick strays (*s.* 46.18 in 414).

<sup>128</sup> *ep.* 93.5.17. On 25 June 399, an edict was addressed to the North African *Vicarius*, Sapidianus, that confirmed Catholic privileges and penalized its opponents (*cod. Theod.* 16.2.34). Many Donatists at this point converted to Catholicism simply in order to retain their property (*c. litt. Pet.* 2.98.225). However, this was a government initiative not a clerical one.

<sup>129</sup> Imperial legislation against the Donatists began in 392 (see *cod. Theod.* 16.5.21-6), but it was largely ineffective.

Donatist bishop Optatus of Thamugadi and the *Comes Africae* Gildo.<sup>130</sup> However, Gildo's failed revolt secured imperial favor toward the Catholics.<sup>131</sup> Once Augustine accepted imperial coercion against the Donatists, he nuanced his portrayal of *mater ecclesia* to fit his changed position concerning imperial support.

Like Cyprian, his primary scriptural precedent for asserting the exclusion of his opponents from the promise of divine inheritance is the story of Sarah and Hagar; however, he differed significantly in his exegetical reading of it.<sup>132</sup> In *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 11-12 (407), he argues that Ishmael was indeed Sarah's son because she borrowed Hagar's womb, and Ishmael's exclusion could not have been based on his servile status, since in the story of Jacob and Esau the latter was also rejected despite his freeborn status.<sup>133</sup> Rather, Augustine claims that it was Ishmael's actions towards Sarah that led to his disinheritance and the punishment against his mother.<sup>134</sup> Applying this exegesis to the Donatists, Augustine states at the closing of his sermon, "And even if you have suffered bodily affliction, O party of Donatists, at the hands of the Catholic Church, you are Hagar suffering at the hands of Sarah; *return to your mistress.*"<sup>135</sup> By rooting his

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<sup>130</sup> See Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 208-226.

<sup>131</sup> After attempts to persuade the Donatists to join the Catholic Church resulted in violent resistance, Catholic bishops decided at the Council of Carthage in 404 to seek the imposition of monetary fines on Donatists. In 405, Emperor Honorius sent an edict and three *decreta* pronouncing Donatists heretical; as such, their ecclesial property was to be given to Catholics and their assemblies were prohibited upon pain of flogging (*cod. Theod.* 16.5.37-8, 6.4-5, and 11.2).

<sup>132</sup> *cath. fr.* 18 and 70.

<sup>133</sup> *Jo. ev. tr.* 11.10.

<sup>134</sup> *Jo. ev. tr.* 12.4.

<sup>135</sup> *Jo. ev. tr.* 11.15 (CCSL 36:120.18-20): "et si passa es, o pars Donati, corporalem afflictionem ab ecclesia catholica, a Sara passa es Agar; redi ad dominam tuam" (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/12, 227).

argument for the correction of Donatists in this scriptural example, he is able to provide divine justification for Catholic support of imperial coercion against the Donatists.

Augustine, however, understands this punishment as loving correction:

“Whatever, then, the true and lawful mother does, even if it is felt to be harsh and bitter, she does not repay evil with evil, but applies the good of discipline to expel the evil of iniquity, not out of harmful hatred, but out of healing love.”<sup>136</sup> Like Sarah, correction through Mother Church, while it may be perceived as spiteful punishment, is directed at correction for the purpose of salvation. Although Augustine did, in one instance, appeal to the mercy of Mother Church in dissuading the imperial commissioner, Marcellinus, from punishing Donatists following the Council of Carthage in 411,<sup>137</sup> he continued to advocate for the correction of the Donatists even after their violent backlashes had significantly decreased. In his letter to Boniface in 417, he again compares the Donatists to the impudence of Hagar and argues that by forcing Donatists into the Catholic Church, there exists the possibility for them to be converted and gathered in the bosom of Mother Church.<sup>138</sup>

### ***Tolerating Bad Children***

Augustine agreed with the Donatists that the true church was necessarily holy and pure. However, he located the church differently and distinguished the spiritual church from the empirical church, with the latter temporarily participating in (but not identical with) the former. As such, in his polemic with the Donatists, he created two different

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<sup>136</sup> *ep.* 93.6 (CSEL 34.2:450.19-22): “quicquid ergo facit uera et legitima mater, etiam si asperum amarumque sentiatur, non malum pro malo reddit, sed bonum disciplinae expellendo malum iniquitatis adponit non odio nocendi sed dilectione sanandi” (Trans. Teske, *NCP* II/1, 380).

<sup>137</sup> *ep.* 133.3.

<sup>138</sup> *ep.* 185.12, 30 and 51.

senses of the church and used the metaphor of *mater ecclesia* for both senses of the church (i.e., for the universal community of saints and for the temporally mixed association of sinners and saints). By doing so, Augustine expanded the scope and role of *mater ecclesia*, identifying her as both the locally mixed community and the eternal, heavenly mother.

On the one hand, Augustine identifies the church of the saints with the heavenly Jerusalem through his typological reading of the Psalms of Ascension (esp. Psalm 122), Galatians 4:26, Hebrews 12:22, and Revelation 21:2.<sup>139</sup> In *Sermon* 214, he preaches, “honor, love, proclaim her as your mother, the Jerusalem which is above, the holy city of God.”<sup>140</sup> Again in *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 11, he understands Jerusalem as portrayed by the psalmists and prophets as a type for the heavenly Jerusalem: “That is why that Jerusalem on earth was the shadow of the heavenly Jerusalem, the mother of us all, who is in heaven.”<sup>141</sup> He interprets the true church in a locative sense, eternally in heaven and figured by the earthly Jerusalem in the Old Testament, and constituted by the saints who exist throughout human history.

On the other hand, Augustine likens the temporal church to a people on a pilgrimage:<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> *Jo. ev. tr.* 11.8; s. 252.7.

<sup>140</sup> s. 214.11 (*RB* 72:20.239-240): “sanctam quoque ecclesiam, matrem uestram, tamquam supernam Hierusalem sanctam ciuitatem dei, honorate, diligite, praedicate” (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/6, 157).

<sup>141</sup> *Jo. ev. tr.* 11.8 (CCSL 36:115.21-22): “ideo illa Ierusalem in terra, umbra erat caelestis Ierusalem matris omnium nostrum, quae est in caelo” (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/12, 218). See also *en. Ps.* 103.1.11 and 105:22; *ep.* 185.11; *conf.* 9.37.

<sup>142</sup> In a few instances, Augustine likens Mother Church to a whore having been redeemed through her spouse (s. 213.8; cf. 191.3). Augustine here probably had the pre- and early-exilic prophetic writings in mind, which liken Jerusalem to a whore (cf. Hos 2:2ff; Isa 1:21; Ezek 16:20ff and 23:11-27). Although he is discussing the temporal church, the singularity of this rhetoric, I think, demonstrates that Augustine was wary of belaboring this point as it could create confusion concerning the holiness of the Church; it is

In leaving our houses, our end was to come to church. So our journey ended here. Again, from here each one of us has the end of going home. We end in the place we are going to. So now then, here we all are, engaged in life's pilgrimage, and we have an end we are moving toward. So where are we moving to? To our home country. What is our home country? Jerusalem, mother of the faithful, mother of the living.<sup>143</sup>

For Augustine, what connects the temporal church with the eternal church is that the former participates in the latter as its *telos*. Since the temporal church is not seen as the end of the journey *per se*, association with it, according to him, does not guarantee inclusion into the heavenly mother-city, and thus, not all in the temporal church are counted among the community of saints:

That's the way of the just, that's the way of the saints, who hold fast to God as their father, hold fast to the Church as their mother. They offend neither this parent nor that, but live in love of both parents and hasten to their eternal inheritance without hurting their father, without hurting their mother.<sup>144</sup>

Only those who persevere until the end within the earthly Mother Church will be counted as saints and included in the heavenly Mother Church.

Augustine also argues that the temporal church, however, is a mixed body, comprised of both sinners and saints. He found the story of Jacob and Esau to be an apt scriptural demonstration of this ecclesial reality. Against the Donatists he argues in *Sermon 4*,

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certainly out of character with his other portrayals. Likewise, in *s. 10.5-7*, Augustine uses Solomon's judgment concerning the maternal claims of the two prostitutes as a parallel between the Donatist and Catholic claims; however, I do not think he is trying to call the Catholic Church a harlot mother.

<sup>143</sup> *Serm Denis 20(s. 16A).9* (CCSL 41:225.300-306): "quod exiimus de domibus nostris, finis nobis fuit ad ecclesiam ueniendi. ergo iter nostrum hic finitum est. hinc iterum unusquisque ad domum suam finem habet redeundi. ibi finit, ubi tendebat. modo ergo in hac peregrinatione constituti, finem habemus ubi tendimus. ubi ergo tendimus? ad patriam nostram. quae est patria nostra? Ierusalem, mater piorum, mater uiuorum" (Trans. Hill, *NCP III/1*, 355).

<sup>144</sup> *s. 22.9* (CCSL 41:299.259-262): "talís est enim uia iustorum, talís est uia sanctorum tenentium deum patrem, tenentium ecclesiam matrem. nec illum parentem nec istam offendentes, sed in amore utriusque parentis uiuentes et ad hereditatem aeternam" (Trans. Hill, *NCP III/2*, 47).

The mother, you see, gave birth to both sons; she bore one hairy, the other smooth. Hairiness stands for sins, smoothness for mildness, that is for cleanness from sins. Two sons are blessed, because the Church blesses two kinds of people. Just as Rebecca bore two sons, so two are begotten in the Church's womb, one hairy, the other smooth... There are people in the Church, you see, who are afraid to mix with sinners, in case they are so to say contaminated by consorting with sinners within the Church's communion – and so they perish through heresies and schisms.<sup>145</sup>

For Augustine, the temporal church contains both sinners and saints mixed together, each possessing different ends. He does not understand this mixture as accidental but as a necessary good and central function of Mother Church. Maintaining Cyprian's dictum that outside of the church there is no salvation, he argues that truth and forgiveness are only present in the womb of the Mother Church.<sup>146</sup> All individuals need the assistance of Mother Church for Augustine.<sup>147</sup> For him, while schismatics are alienated from the mother, sinners are alienated from the father through their idolatry of sin.<sup>148</sup> Yet, through the loving mother, all sinners have the opportunity to gain paternal acceptance through repentance. Concerning the Donatist position on the church and forgiveness, he argues that Mother Church could forgive all sins:

There have been people, you see, who said that for some sins no penance should be allowed; and they have been excluded from the Church, and declared heretics. Over whatever sins you like to think of, our loving mother the Church never loses her tenderness of heart.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> s. 4.14 (CCSL 41:31.334-339, 349-351): "genuit enim mater ambos filios. intendite fratres. genuit unum pilosum, alterum lenem. pili peccata significant, lenitas autem mansuetudinem, id est, munditiam a peccatis. duo filii benedicuntur, quia duo genera benedicat ecclesia. quomodo duos peperit Rebecca, generantur in utero ecclesiae duo, unus pilosus, alter lenis... sunt enim homines in ecclesia qui timent misceri peccatoribus, ne quasi per consortium peccatorum in unitate maculentur, et per haereses et schismata pereant" (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/1, 193).

<sup>146</sup> *bapt.* 4.17.24; *en. Ps.* 57.4-5 and s. 71.28-30, 198.42\*

<sup>147</sup> *en. Ps.* 88.2.14.

<sup>148</sup> *en. Ps.* 88.2.14 and s. 98.42\*.

<sup>149</sup> s. 352.9 (PL 39: 1559): "fuerunt enim qui dicerent, quibusdam peccatis non esse dandam paenitentiam; et exclusi sunt de ecclesia, et haeretici facti sunt. in quibuscumque peccatis non perdit uiscera pia mater

Mother Church is all-embracing for Augustine, with no sin too great for her to reject a repentant child. As with the forced inclusion of Donatists, Augustine believes that the inclusion of sinners at least gave them the opportunity to reconcile with God and hopefully come to be members of the heavenly mother-city.

### ***Receiving Other Children***

The issue of baptism became a rallying point for both parties following the decision at the Council of Arles against rebaptism in 314. While the Donatists continued to hold Cyprian's position on (re)baptizing individuals from other ecclesial communities, Catholics, especially Augustine, dedicated themselves to refuting this practice. Given the historically close association between *mater ecclesia* and baptism, the maternal metaphor appears frequently in the context of this debate. For the Catholics, however, the traditional Cyprianic understanding of the church's exclusive parturition did not square with their acceptance of baptisms performed in heretical or schismatic communities. Optatus of Milevis, for instance, argues that both Catholics and Donatists share the same sacramental womb but differ in regard to paternal inheritance, with only Catholics being accepted by God the Father.<sup>150</sup> Optatus's conceptualization was problematic, however, because it suggests that both communities participated in the same mother/church, which he certainly does not advocate elsewhere.<sup>151</sup>

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ecclesia" (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/10, 148). Cf. *Jo ev. trac.* 49.3; *Gn. litt. imp.* 1.4; *adul. conjug.*; s. 98.2 and 360C.6.

<sup>150</sup> *de schism. Don.* 4.2 and 5.

<sup>151</sup> Optatus defines a schism as breaking the bonds of unity and deserting the root of mother Church (*de schism. Don.* 1.11). His use of a single maternal baptism would work only if he were discussing those schismatics who have returned having been originally baptized in the Catholic Church. It does not work for those baptized in other communities.

Recognizing this problem of applying the traditional understanding of Mother Church's parturient qualities to a changed ecclesial context where rebaptism was no longer allowed, Augustine broadens the notion of the church's motherhood while maintaining her exclusivity. To do so, Augustine deviates from the Cyprianic tradition and argues that individuals baptized in Christian communities outside of the Catholic Church are not of adulterous unions.<sup>152</sup> In other words, he abandons the notion that an individual must be born of the same maternal womb. While he still maintains that all must be associated with Mother Church to have access to the life-giving Holy Spirit, he separates parturition from association, just as he separates the sacrament from its effects. For Augustine, baptism is the one sacrament belonging to Mother Church as the Body of Christ, to whom the sacrament properly belongs.<sup>153</sup> In a letter to Boniface, the Numidian Catholic bishop of Cataqua, he states,

The whole Church, our mother, which exists in the saints, does this, because the Church gives birth to each and every one. For, since the sacrament of Christian baptism is one and the same sacrament, it has such power, even among heretics, and suffices for the consecration of infants to Christ, although it does not suffice for the reception of eternal life.<sup>154</sup>

Despite the existence of different wombs, the sacrament and neophytes resulting from it belong to the true mother. Thus, Augustine does not see the spiritual rebirth as exclusive

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<sup>152</sup> *bapt.* 4.17.

<sup>153</sup> *ep.* 23.4.

<sup>154</sup> *ep.* 98.5 (CSEL 34.2:526.21-527.3): "tota hoc ergo mater ecclesia, quae in sanctis est, facit, quia tota omnes, tota singulos parit. nam si christiani baptismi sacramentum, quando unum atque id ipsum est, etiam apud haereticos ualet et sufficit ad consecrationem, quamuis ad uitae aeternae participationem non sufficiat" (Trans. Teske, *NCP* II/1, 429).



to *mater ecclesia*, but he regards its effects as dependent on an individual's association with it.<sup>155</sup>

Augustine justifies this distinction based on his reading of 1 Corinthians 1:10-13, which he filters through the stories of Sarah and Hagar and Jacob and Esau. In *On Baptism*, Augustine argues that, just as being born from the womb of Mother Church does not guarantee salvation (as was the case with Esau), being born of a different womb does not necessitate damnation either.<sup>156</sup> Another womb can bear offspring, as was the case with Hagar; however, their legitimacy is determined by their association with the true mother. According to Augustine, Ishmael lost his father's inheritance not because he was born from Hagar but because he was dissociated from Sarah, the rightful mother who bore God's promise; thus, the determining factor of legitimacy is not where the individual is born but with whom he/she is associated.<sup>157</sup> Through this reading, Augustine can scripturally justify his position that the existence, and even efficacy, of baptism is not dependent on where it is received but on which church the person spiritually accepted.

Unlike Optatus, who stressed both Catholics and Donatists shared the same sacramental

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<sup>155</sup> While Augustine understood that baptisms performed in schismatic or heretical communities belonged to the community of saints as the Body of Christ, he asserted, nevertheless, efficacious baptisms still existed in these communities, since the power of forgiveness belonged to Christ himself. It is even possible that Augustine believed that schismatic or heretical baptisms actually conferred holiness, even though it would have been immediately lost due to their separation from the communion of saints (*bapt.* 6.5.7 and 7.52.100).

<sup>156</sup> *bapt.* 1.10.14, cf. 1.15.23. Augustine will also use these stories to contrast the earthly and heavenly cities, with the former represented by Hagar and her decedents (the children of nature) and the latter represented by Sarah and her descendants (the children of grace), see *civ. Dei* 15.2 and 16.26.

<sup>157</sup> In *s.* 10 and 341, Augustine likens the difference between the Donatists and Catholics to being born of two different mothers. In the former, he uses Solomon's judgment of the two prostitutes (1 Kings 3:16-28) to argue that the true mother/Catholic Church is the one who cares for her child rather than trying to tear it apart like the false mother/Donatist Church. In the latter, he uses the example of the acceptability of wet nurses weaning children for the true mother. In *civ. Dei* 16.34, Augustine's analysis of Gen 25:23 concerning the sons of Hagar and Keturah suggests that he believed some divine gifts were located in other ecclesial communities, given that Abraham had given something to the sons of these women despite their disinheritance.

womb, Augustine justified the Catholic position against rebaptism while upholding the distinction between them.

## 2. The Fecund Mother

### *Baptism as Rebirth*

Given the strong association between *mater ecclesia* and the necessity of baptism as the fundamental introductory rite into the church, it is no surprise that Augustine frequently relies on the maternal metaphor in his catechetical sermons to instruct initiates in the Christian faith. These sermons were directed at the catechumens who had become *competentes* (i.e., askers), those who were officially preparing for baptism during the Lenten season; previously, they had been *auditores* (i.e., hearers), individuals inscribed as catechumens who attended Christian services but were dismissed before the rituals of baptism and the Eucharist. *Competentes* would then begin a rigorous period of discipline (i.e., fasting, attending daily instruction, abstaining from meat, wine, bathing, and marital relations),<sup>158</sup> which Augustine often likens to fetal gestation in a mother's womb conceived by the paternal seed.<sup>159</sup> He says they are called *competentes* because they are "agitating their mother's womb, asking to be born."<sup>160</sup> Unlike real mothers who nourish

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<sup>158</sup> For a good overview of the baptismal liturgy in Hippo see William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 244-93, and Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the Fourth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 778-89.

<sup>159</sup> *s.* 56.5 and *bapt.* 1.10.14. Augustine is not always consistent on this point. In *s.* 94A.3, he suggests conception occurs when an individual becomes inscribed as a "hearer." Augustine's use of paternal seed is also slightly odd; given his polemic with the Manicheans whose materialistic dualism located goodness in seeds, it is reasonable to believe Augustine would have avoided spermatocentric language. However, the idea of paternal seed helps to explain analogously why baptism can exist outside of the Catholic Church, which he probably derived from the scriptural notion of the seed of Abraham (see *Jo. ev. tr.* 12).

<sup>160</sup> *s.* 228.1 (PL 38:1101): "quoniam materna uiscera, ut nascerentur, petendo pulsabant" (Trans. Hill, *NCP* 257 III/6, 257).

infants with sin in their wombs, Mother Church spiritually nourishes her children with faith.<sup>161</sup>

Two weeks prior to their baptism, the bishop orally delivered and explained the baptismal creed (*traditio symboli*), which the *competentes* would then practice the following week and formally recite in front of the congregation before receiving baptism (*redditio symboli*).<sup>162</sup> When reaching the article on the Holy Church, Augustine expounds on the church's maternity and instructs the *competentes* concerning what membership in the church entails.<sup>163</sup> While the church births the members of the Body of Christ, baptism does not guarantee continued membership in the true church.<sup>164</sup> Mother Church merely tolerates the presence of sinners in her temporal state but will eventually reject them in the end; only through maintenance of the mother's faith, which is encompassed in the creed and discipline of the church, can an individual be in association with the true church.<sup>165</sup>

On the week prior to their baptism, after having practiced reciting the baptismal creed, the *competentes* then received the Lord's Prayer.<sup>166</sup> Augustine again appeals to the

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<sup>161</sup> *en. Ps.* 50.10, cf. *s.* 216.8.

<sup>162</sup> *s.* 215.1, and 216.7.

<sup>163</sup> *s.* 214.11.

<sup>164</sup> *s.* 213.8.

<sup>165</sup> *s.* 215.1.

<sup>166</sup> Hill posits more ambiguity in the liturgy (*NCP* III/3, 106 nt. 1) with the creed being given during the first or second week of Lent and recited one to two weeks later, and in *s.* 58, Hill thinks Augustine is confused on the timing when he says the *competentes* are to give back the creed the next Saturday at Easter vigil (*NCP* III/3, 125 nt. 3). There is no reason to think Augustine is confused. Augustine is clear that the practice of the *redditio* occurred a week before the vigil elsewhere (*s.* 213.11). The practice of the *redditio* occurred the same day as the sermon on the Lord's Prayer (*s.* 58.1), and Augustine's reminder to the catechumens about memorizing would further support this (*ibid.*).

motherhood of the church in his exposition of Matthew 6:9 (i.e., “Our Father who art in heaven”): “We all had our fathers and mothers on earth, of whom we were born to a life of toil and ultimately death; we have found our parents, God our Father and the Church our mother, of whom we may be born to eternal life.”<sup>167</sup> Augustine continues the long North African tradition, beginning with Tertullian, of linking the fatherhood of God with the motherhood of the church. In this context, he stresses to the catechumens that their admission into the church is the beginning of a new life with a new family.

Being enrolled as a *competentes*, however, did not constitute full membership into the church, and Augustine often warns the catechumens of their precarious unbaptized state. In *Sermon 216*, which was delivered specifically to the *competentes* preparing for baptism, he advises the catechumens, “Strive to be brought forth in health, not fatally aborted. Look, Mother Church is in labor, see, she is groaning in travail to give birth to you, to bring you forth into the light of faith. Do not agitate her maternal womb with your impatience, and thus constrict the passage to your delivery.”<sup>168</sup> Although Augustine portrays catechumens as having been conceived, he also stresses that they have not yet been born, and they must guard against falling away and preventing their life-giving birth.<sup>169</sup> Unlike Ambrose, Augustine does not seem to hold a position of baptism by

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<sup>167</sup> s. 57.2 (*HomoSp.*, 414.25-415.27): “Habebamus patrem et matrem in terra, ut nasceremur ad labores et mortem; inuenimus alios parentes, deum patrem et matrem ecclesiam, a quibus nascamur ad uitam aeternam” (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/3, 110). See also s. 56.5 and 14.

<sup>168</sup> s. 216.7 (PL 38:1080): “enitere ut salubriter pariaris, ne feraliter abortiaris. ecce uterus matris ecclesiae, ecce ut te pariat, atque in lucem fidei producat, laborat in gemitu suo. nolite uestra impatientia uiscera materna concutere, et partus uestri ianuas angustare” (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/6, 171). See also *Jo. ev. tr.* 12.3.

<sup>169</sup> See also s. 94A.3-4\*.

desire for catechumens who die prior to their actual reception of the sacrament.<sup>170</sup> When Augustine was being pressured by a wealthy family to allow a deceased catechumen to be buried along with his Christian family members, he informs them that the church never allowed fallen catechumens to be buried among full members and warns the other catechumens that neither families nor Mother Church could help them in such a situation.<sup>171</sup> Death, for Augustine, terminates the chance for becoming a member of Mother Church and receiving eternal life, although ill-stricken catechumens can receive a baptism while unconscious.<sup>172</sup>

The Saturday Easter vigil was the final preparation of the *competentes* for their reception of baptism. After they recited the creed and renounced the devil before the community, the *competentes* were led to the baptistery, which was attached to the church itself, to receive the initiatory rite and become full members of the Church.<sup>173</sup> Initiates disrobed in the preceding anteroom and descended naked down the shallow cruciform-styled font, which Augustine frequently refers to as a womb (*vulva/uterus/viscera*).<sup>174</sup> The descent into the font and the ascent from its waters symbolized the spiritual reality of

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<sup>170</sup> Augustine's notion of the necessity of rebirth and the damnation of unbaptized infants due to original sin strongly suggests that Augustine also believed that even *competentes*, who died prior to baptism, were also damned regardless of their desire. Moreover, the fact that African bishops made a special provision for baptizing the unconscious dying (provided they previously had made their intention known by enrolling as a catechumen in the church) suggests that they perceived a physical baptism prior to death as absolutely necessary for salvation (*brev. Hipp.* 32, cf. *conf.* 4.4.8).

<sup>171</sup> *s.* 142.4 (appendix).

<sup>172</sup> *s.* 393.1.

<sup>173</sup> On the baptistery at Hippo see Robin Jensen, "Church Buildings in Roman Africa," (forthcoming) and Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 785.

<sup>174</sup> Augustine makes this explicit association in *s.* 56.5, the first in North Africa. He may have had the font in mind in *s.* 213.8 and *bapt.* 1.10.14, but the references are vague. In other instances, however, he associates the womb with the gestation period of catechumens (*s.* 216.7) or the waters of the font (*s.* 119.4).

the former self dying and the new self being reborn into eternal life from the womb of Mother Church.<sup>175</sup> The newly baptized members received a post-baptismal *chrismation*, the laying on of hands, and an *alba* (i.e., white robe) to wear signifying their new state of purity.<sup>176</sup>

Although the newly baptized were considered full members of the church, Augustine still refers to them as *infantes*, since they had only recently been born into the church.<sup>177</sup> During their first week, the neophytes continued to wear the *alba* and joined the clergy in the chancel during the Eucharist, which he refers to as their cradle (*cunabulum*).<sup>178</sup> These rituals functioned not only to signify the status of the new members but also as a protective feature for those who were still recent to the faith. On the Octave Day of Easter, Augustine counsels the *infantes* who were about to be fully incorporated with the congregation,

You are called infants, because you have been born again, and have entered upon a new life, and have been born again to eternal life, provided you don't stifle what has been reborn in you by leading bad lives. You are to be given back to the Christian people, you are to be mixed in with the people of the faithful; beware of imitating the bad faithful, or rather the false faithful; those who are faithful in their confession of faith, but unfaithful, unbelievers in the bad lives they lead.<sup>179</sup>

Echoing Paul's notion of 1 Corinthians 3:2, Augustine here makes clear that the neophytes had only begun their journey and were still at a spiritually infantile state.

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<sup>175</sup> s. 125.6 and 258.2.

<sup>176</sup> s. 146.2, 223.1, 260C.7.

<sup>177</sup> *ep. Jo.* 3.1 and s. 223.1, 226, 228.1, 228B.1, 229A.1, 260A.1, 260C.1.

<sup>178</sup> See Jensen, *Mater Ecclesia and Fons Aeterna*, 145.

<sup>179</sup> s. 260.1 (PL 38:1202): "infantes appellamini, quoniam regenerati estis, et nouam uitam ingressi estis, et ad uitam aeternam renati estis, si hoc quod in uobis renatum est, male uiuendo non suffocetis. reddendi estis populis, miscendi estis plebi fidelium: caute ne imitemini malos fideles, imo falsos fideles; quasi confitendo fideles, sed male uiuendo infideles" (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/7, 183). Cf. s. 146.2.

While the nourishment they received in their catechetical training and would continue to receive through the hearing of Scripture and the reception of the Eucharist was sufficient, failure is still a distinct possibility, since the physical church body is comprised of sinners. However, the true offspring are those elected adherents who would not be torn from Mother Church.<sup>180</sup>

### ***Celebrating the Martyrs' Baptisms***

Just as baptism through water marked the day of rebirth for catechumens, baptisms through blood (i.e., martyrdom) were also understood as a second birth with feast days functioning as a birthday celebration for the heroically fallen members of the church. As demonstrated in previous chapters, the notion of *mater ecclesia* was closely tied to martyrdom and the context of persecution, serving as a model for community behavior and delineating its membership. Not surprisingly, Augustine often discusses the maternity of the church in his feast-day sermons. He delivered these sermons, however, in a context different from his predecessors. With the threat of imperial persecution no longer present, he links the metaphor of *mater ecclesia* and its relationship to the martyrs to different ecclesiological concerns.

The cult of the martyrs was a powerfully popular practice in North Africa. While stories, such as the *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* and the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicity*, were integral to the heritage of the North African church and provided Christians with heroic models for emulation, the cult of the martyrs was also perceived as a threat to episcopal authority. As discussed in Chapter Three, this was certainly the case with Cyprian who eventually curtailed popularly held beliefs concerning the intercessory powers of the martyrs. The popularity of the martyr cults, however, continued, and by the

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<sup>180</sup> s. 252A.5.

fourth century, the liturgical use and collection of martyr relics was a well-established practice in North Africa.<sup>181</sup>

Again, attempts were made to restrict the popular practice, which was becoming increasingly problematic. Not only were the bodies of the martyrs being divided and sold,<sup>182</sup> but the celebrations were becoming more of an excuse for revelry than for reverence among the laity; Augustine cites the vigil for Cyprian as an occasion for drunken and lewd behavior.<sup>183</sup> Even though Aurelius, the bishop of Carthage, replaced the popular celebration with a vigil service, and the Council of Carthage (397) banned graveside commemorations,<sup>184</sup> indulgent practices still continued at the site of martyrs. An irksome Augustine, in *Sermon 335D*, admonishes his congregation for their persistent behavior.<sup>185</sup> Equally as problematic for Augustine was the use and popularity of martyr cults among the Donatists. Because the Donatists understood themselves as maintaining the purity of the true church against the state-supported Catholic Church, they used martyrdom stories as justification for their cause when the community was pressured from Catholic and imperial authorities. Donatists claimed that they were the true inheritors of the martyrs, and some tried to emulate the martyrs by violently resisting

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<sup>181</sup> Robin M. Jensen and J. Patout Burns, "Honoring the Victorious Heroes: The Cult of the Martyrs," in *The Practice of Christianity in Roman Africa* by J. Patout Burns and Robin M. Jensen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

<sup>182</sup> See *op. mon.* 28.36. In Rome, burials at the tombs of martyrs were banned within the city walls in 381 (*cod. Theod.* 9.17.6), and in 386, dividing and selling the bodies of martyrs was banned (*cod. Theod.* 9.17.7).

<sup>183</sup> *s.* 311.5.

<sup>184</sup> See *ep.* 22 and *s.* 311.5 and 308A.7. See also W. H. C. Frend "The North African Cult of the Martyrs," in *Jeneitsvorstellungen in Antike und Christenstun: Gedenkschrift für Alfred Stuiber, Jahrbuch für* (Münster Wesfalen: Ascendorffsche, 1982), 154-67.

<sup>185</sup> *s.* 335D.2.



imperial power or by voluntarily jumping from precipices.<sup>186</sup> Although Catholic leaders perceived such actions as fanatical and preached vehemently against them, Donatists and even some Catholic lay members venerated their remains.<sup>187</sup>

Like Cyprian, Augustine attempts to respect the cult of the martyrs while simultaneously relegating their celebration and power to the episcopal authority of the Catholic Church. Aside from his attempts at curtailing the debauched practices associated with the cult of the martyrs,<sup>188</sup> he often directs his feast-day sermons towards controlling the popular practice. Against the claims of the Donatists, he repeatedly preaches that the cause for martyrdom, not the act of dying, is what makes a true martyr.<sup>189</sup> Only an individual dying within the true church (i.e., the Catholic Church) as a witness to the cause of unity and justice could be considered a true martyr worthy of veneration. To his laity, Augustine preaches against excessive celebration and utilizes the martyrs as models of endurance and humility within the faith. In *Sermon 328*, he states, “This is what celebrating the feast day of the martyrs with devotion and piety really means—not drowning yourself in wine, but imitating their faith and endurance.”<sup>190</sup> As Maureen A.

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<sup>186</sup> *gesta. coll. Carth.* 3.102; *c. litt. Pet.* 2.92.202; *s.* 313E; *ep.* 185.3.12; *c. ep. Parm.* 1.10.16.

<sup>187</sup> *ep.* 88.8 and *reg. eccl. Carthag.* 83.

<sup>188</sup> Augustine, while a priest, appealed to Aurelius to stop celebrations (*ep.* 22). Augustine also likely had a role in the ban of graveside commemorations at the Council of Carthage in 397 as well as the decision in 411 to require episcopal approval for the establishment of shrines. *Sermon 305A.1* suggests that commemorations were more frequent previously but reduced, given Augustine’s explanation as to why more celebrations were not taking place.

<sup>189</sup> *s.* 328.7, 331.2, 335.2, 335C.2, and 335G.2.

<sup>190</sup> *s.* 328.8 (*RB* 51:20.168-169): “hoc est dies martyrum deuota pietate celebrare, non uino ingurgitari sed illorum fidem et patientiam imitari” (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/9, 180). Cf. *s.* 37.3 (avoiding heresies) and *s.* 301.6, 302.2-6, 304.3 (avoiding worldly trappings).

Tilley claims, Augustine “domesticated” the martyrs by transforming them into models of proper Christian living.<sup>191</sup>

Augustine also uses the image of *mater ecclesia* in his feast-day sermons to restrict and define the role of the martyrs in the church. In *Sermon 37*, which was delivered on the feast day of the Scillitan Martyrs at the Basilica Novarum (ca. 410), he preaches on Proverbs 31:10-31, the valiant woman. Rather than tie the deeds of the female martyrs, whom the community is celebrating, to the valiant woman, he instead compares her to the church:

Now all of you listeners, it’s quite clear from your response, are saying to yourselves, “She must be the Church.” I support this idea. Who else, after all, could be the mother of martyrs? That’s the truth. It’s just as you have understood it. The woman I want to say something about is the Church.<sup>192</sup>

Anticipating possible objections to his sermon, he assures his audience that he has not overlooked the martyrs by discussing the church, since the church is the “mother of martyrs” and the success of the martyrs is mediated solely through the church.<sup>193</sup>

Augustine does something similar in *Sermon 301* (ca. 417), which he delivered on the feast day of the Maccabean martyrs. Concerning the mother in 2 Maccabees 7, he exclaims,

One woman, one mother, how she set before our eyes our one mother, the Church, everywhere urging her children to die for the name of the one by whom she conceived and bore them! In this way the world has been filled

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<sup>191</sup> Maureen A. Tilley, “Harnessing the Martyrs: Social Control of Hagiography in Roman North Africa” (paper presented at the North American Patristics Society, Chicago, IL, May 30, 1998).

<sup>192</sup> s. 37.1 (CCSL 41:447.23-27): “omnis nunc auditor, quantum ex affectu uestro satis apparet, dicit in corde suo: ecclesia debet esse. confirmo istam cogitationem. nam quae potuit esse altera martyrum mater? ita est. quod intellexistis, hoc est. de qua muliere uolumus aliquid dicere, ecclesia est” (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/2, 184).

<sup>193</sup> s. 37.1-2.

with the blood of martyrs, and from the seed thus broadcast it has yielded the crops of the Church.<sup>194</sup>

Like Cyprian, Augustine understands the mother of 2 Maccabees to be a figure for the church. However, given his context of a state-supported church, he does not make martyrdom the *telos* of the church but the instrument for its popularity and spread. The Maccabean martyrs also provide, according to him, an alternate spectacle for Christians to draw inspiration from in avoiding the trappings of worldly spectacles.<sup>195</sup>

On the feast day of St. Lawrence in 417,<sup>196</sup> Augustine argues against the position that only the martyrs are the true followers of Christ:

What hope, I repeat, is there for these, what hope for all of us, if the only ones who follow Christ are those who shed their blood for him? So is Mother Church going to lose all those children of hers, whom she has brought forth all the more abundantly, the more secure she has been in the time of peace? In order not to lose them, is she to pray for persecution, pray for trials and temptations? Perish the thought, brothers and sisters.<sup>197</sup>

Possibly a concern arising from former Donatists joining the Catholic Church, Augustine attempts to dispel the belief that only the martyrs were true Christians, an argument Donatists used against Catholics. He claims that the example of humility and avoidance

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<sup>194</sup> s. 301.1 (PL 38:1380): “una mulier, una mater, quomodo nobis ante oculos posuit unam matrem sanctam ecclesiam, ubique exhortantem filios suos pro illius nomine mori, de quo eos concepit et peperit? sic sanguine martyrum impletus orbis praeiacatis seminibus seges ecclesiae pullulavit” (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/8, 282).

<sup>195</sup> s. 301.1 and 301A.7.

<sup>196</sup> In s. 302 (ca. 400), Augustine also uses the feast day of Lawrence to discuss a violent riot that recently occurred in Hippo in which a soldier, who had committed an unnamed atrocity, was lynched by a crowd of people rather than being punished through due course by secular authorities. Here, Augustine uses the example of Lawrence and his submission to secular authorities to warn his audience against mob activity. In this letter, he refers to the church as a protective mother when discussing the right of sanctuary (22).

<sup>197</sup> s. 304.2 (PL 38:1369): “uae istis, inquam, quae nobis omnibus spes est, si non sequuntur Christum, nisi qui pro ipso sanguinem fundunt? perditura est ergo filios suos, quos tanto fecundius, quanto securius tempore pacis enixa est mater ecclesia? quos ne perdat, oranda est persecutio, oranda tentatio? absit, fratres” (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/8, 317).

of worldly allurements, which the martyrs demonstrate, is the mark of a being a true child of Mother Church.<sup>198</sup> Thus, he places the call to martyrdom equally alongside other lifestyle callings within the church.

Augustine's minimization of the power of martyrs in relation to the church is most apparent in his sermons concerning Stephen. According to Robin M. Jensen and J. Patout Burns, miracles and healings were not historic features at the shrines of the North African martyrs as they were at other places, such as Rome and Nola; however, this changed with the introduction of Stephen's relics to North Africa at Uzalis in 418.<sup>199</sup> At the shrine in Uzalis, healing miracles were reported to occur almost immediately and news of this spread rapidly, prompting many Christians to make pilgrimages seeking intercession. Augustine obtained some of the relics and had a sanctuary built to house them in 425. With their arrival, however, he anticipated the possible fervor and tried to temper it by making clear that any miracles were performed in the name of Christ and the shrine's altar is to God, not Stephen.<sup>200</sup>

In *Sermon 317*, which was possibly delivered on the occasion when the relics arrived at Hippo, Augustine states,

So let us celebrate Saint Stephen's birthday, and honor him with due reverence. We have celebrated the Lord's birthday; let us also celebrate his servant's. We have thronged to the birth of the savior; let us throng to the birthday of the martyr. The undefiled virgin Mary gave birth to our Lord, and our holy mother the Church has conferred on the glories of Stephen the palm of martyrdom.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> s. 304.3.

<sup>199</sup> Robin M. Jensen and J. Patout Burns, "Honoring the Victorious Heroes: The Cult of the Martyrs (forthcoming).

<sup>200</sup> s. 316.1 and 318.1.

<sup>201</sup> s. 317.6 (*RB* 44:205.28-32): "sancti ergo Stephani natalem celebremus et cum debita ueneratione colamus. celebrauimus natalem domini; celebremus et serui. frequentauimus natiuitatem saluatoris;

Through his association of the motherhood of Mary and the church, he implies that the church bore the martyrs, just as Mary bore Christ. Moreover, he asserts that the glory of martyrdom is not simply due to the action of the martyr but requires conferral by the church itself (a possible allusion to a conciliar decision in 411 that shrines and relics required episcopal approval).<sup>202</sup> Again in *Sermon 323*, Augustine attributes the source of a reported miracle at the shrine of Stephen to the church, rather than to Stephen or his power as a martyr and saint. While relating a story to his congregation about a mother who had cursed her children at a baptismal font,<sup>203</sup> he was interrupted by shouts that the healing of a certain woman named Palladia had just taken place, to which he responds, “Let our joy constitute our thanksgiving. Mother Church was heard more speedily than that accursed mother was to destructive effect.”<sup>204</sup> Despite the fact that a miracle took place at the shrine of Stephen, while Augustine was recounting a miracle attributed to Stephen, he nevertheless assigns the healing of Palladia to the power of *mater ecclesia*, and as a result, diminishes the power of the shrine.

### ***Baptizing Infants***

Augustine also utilized the motherhood of the church in his polemic against Pelagianism when discussing the tradition and necessity of infant baptism. Julian of

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frequentemus et natalem martiris. dominum nostrum peperit incorrupta uirgo Maria, et Stephanum gloriosum ad martirii palmam sancta mater prouexit ecclesia” (Trans. Hill, *NCP III/9*, 146).

<sup>202</sup> *reg. eccl. Carth.* 83 (*CCSL* 149, 204-5).

<sup>203</sup> I think Hill is correct in positing that the reason the woman cursed her children at the baptismal font (as opposed to the altar) was to symbolically appeal to the motherhood of the Church (*NCP III/9*, 161 nt. 2); she was in effect cursing the children born from her womb and from the womb of the church.

<sup>204</sup> *s.* 323.4 (PL 38:1446): “sit gaudium nostrum actio gratiarum. citius exaudita est mater ecclesia, quam in perniciem maledicta mater illa” (Trans. Hill, *NCP III/9*, 164).

Eclanum accused Augustine of being a Manichean due to his doctrine of original sin, arguing that sin was a personal defect committed by a rational agent, while the notion of sin transmitted through sexual concupiscence violated God's omnibenevolence. In response to this charge, Augustine retorts in *Against Julian, an Unfinished Book* (428-30),

To the detriment of justice you are so unjust that you are not afraid to raise under my name the infection of the Manichean plague as a charge against many holy men, sons and fathers of the Church of Christ, disciples and teachers, who came before us, and against the mother of them all, the Catholic Church.<sup>205</sup>

Repeatedly, he claims that infant baptism was a custom of Mother Church, and as such, part of the apostolic tradition.<sup>206</sup>

Augustine portrays Julian's arguments against infant baptism as a vividly violent attack directed against Mother Church. In *Against Julian* (ca. 421/2), he asks,

Should you then arm yourselves against your mother the Church with your little arguments like daggers to kill your mother? Should you seek the hidden power of her sacrament, not by gently touching, but by slashing at her, as at the bones in the womb of a pregnant woman, for by that power she conceives little ones in order to purify them, even though they are born of parents already purified?<sup>207</sup>

Again, Augustine plays off of the church's maternal role in creating spiritual *infantes* to argue that denying the necessity of infant baptism consequently denies the parturient role of Mother Church; Julian's attacks are portrayed as an attempt to abort infants before

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<sup>205</sup> *c. Jul. imp.* 3.61 (CSEL 85.1:400.13-17): "damno iustitiae sic iniquus es, ut sub meo nomine tot uiris sanctis, ecclesiae Christi filiis et patribus, discipulis atque doctoribus, qui ante nos fuerunt, atque ipsi matri omnium, catholicae ecclesiae, non timeas Manicheae pestis obiectare contagium" (Trans. Teske, *NCP I/25*, 317).

<sup>206</sup> *c. Jul. imp.* 3.137; cf. *Gen. litt.* 10.23.39 and s. 176.2.

<sup>207</sup> *c. Jul.* 6.17 (PL 44:832): "ideone contra ecclesiam matrem uestram ratiunculis uestris quasi parricidalibus pugiunculis debetis armari, ut uim sacramenti eius occultam, qua purgandos concipit paruulos, quamuis de purgatis parentibus natos" (Trans. Teske, *NCP I/24*, 488-9).

they become *infantes* of the church. However, because the practice of infant baptism has its roots in the apostolicity of Mother Church, Augustine asserts that Julian's attacks are of no avail:

This [infant baptism] has the authority of Mother Church behind it, this is maintained by the well-established rule of truth; whoever brings his battering ram against this solid oak, against this unbreachable wall, is shattered to bits himself.<sup>208</sup>

The maternity of the church with its association of apostolicity is, for Augustine, protective and indestructibly safeguards the traditions of the church and the salvation of its youngest members.

What also demonstrates the veracity of the practice for Augustine are the mothers who brought their children in danger of death to be baptized. In *Sermon* 293, delivered on the feast day of John the Baptist (ca. 413), Augustine asks,

Does an infant need a liberator? Certainly it does; the proof is its mother faithfully hurrying to the church with her baby to be baptized. The proof is its mother the Church receiving the baby to be washed clean and either to be let go in peace, now set free, or to be brought up in piety. Who would dare to take a stand against such a mother?<sup>209</sup>

Both the desire of the physical mother and the admittance of the spiritual mother demonstrate the necessity of infant baptism. Augustine agrees that infant baptism would be superfluous if there was no sin to cleanse. However, he attributes the fearful impulsion of the parents to a real spiritual deficiency in the child rather than a superstitious

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<sup>208</sup> s. 294.17 (PL 38:1346): "hoc habet autoritas matris ecclesiae, hoc fundatus ueritatis obtinet canon: contra hoc robur, contra hunc inexpugnabilem murum quisquis arietat, ipse confringitur" (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/8, 192).

<sup>209</sup> s. 293.10 (PL 38:1333): "quid ergo, ait aliquis, et infans indiget liberatore? plane indiget: testis est mater fideliter currens cum paruulo baptizando ad ecclesiam. testis est ipsa mater ecclesia suscipiens paruulum abluendum, et aut liberatum dimittendum, aut pietate nutriendum. quis audeat dicere testimonium contra tantam matrem?" (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/8, 155). See also *Jo. ev. tr.* 38.6; s. 183.12; *c. Jul. imp.* 3.52; *c. ep. Pel.* 2.11.

sentiment on the part of the parents; otherwise, parents need to stop bringing their children to the church to be baptized.<sup>210</sup> Augustine himself had experienced such parental concern when he became ill as a child, and Monica had quickly prepared arrangements for Augustine to be baptized.<sup>211</sup>

Against the Pelagian charge that an infant cannot possibly make the required consent for baptism, Augustine again appeals in *Sermon 176* to the church's maternity:

Mother Church lends them other people's feet to come by, other people's hearts to believe with, other people's tongues to confess with; thus, since they are burdened with their sickness through another person sinning, it is right that when they recover health here they should be saved by another person confessing on their behalf.<sup>212</sup>

Through the confession of others within the church, the baptism was considered efficacious despite the lack of conscience choice. Augustine himself witnessed this in his youth when he was teaching in Thagaste. After a friend became ill and was unconsciously baptized, he chided him about the baptism; the friend, however, rebuked Augustine and acknowledged his unconscious conversion.<sup>213</sup>

Augustine, however, makes it clear that the grace given is through the church itself. In *Epistle 98* (ca. 408-13), he instructs Boniface, the Numidian bishop of Cataqua,

Little ones are, of course, presented to receive spiritual grace, not so much from those in whose hands they are carried, though they do also receive it from them if they are good believing people, as from the universal society of saints and believers... The whole Church, our mother, which exists in the saints, does this, because the Church gives birth to each and every one.

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<sup>210</sup> *s.* 176.2.

<sup>211</sup> *conf.* 1.11.17.

<sup>212</sup> *s.* 176.2 (PL 38:950): "accommodat illis mater ecclesia aliorum pedes ut ueniant, aliorum cor ut credant, aliorum linguam ut fateantur: ut quoniam quod aegri sunt alio peccante praegravantur, sic cum hi sani sunt, alio pro eis confitente saluentur" (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/5, 273). See also *nat. et gr.* 23 and *pecc. mer.* 1.38.

<sup>213</sup> *conf.* 4.4.8.



For, since the sacrament of Christian baptism is one and the same sacrament, it has such power, even among heretics, and suffices for the consecration of the infant to Christ, although it does not suffice for the reception of eternal life.<sup>214</sup>

Augustine equates *mater ecclesia* with the communion of saints. While the mother tends to all physically associated with her, she is ultimately comprised of the saints who make the pure, invisible church. While the life-giving parturition of the church can be experienced by those not consciously acknowledging the sacrament or by those outside of the church, a conscious denial of the unity of the saintly church removes those effects.

### Augustine's Sources

#### 1. Patristic

Augustine cites Cyprian multiple times in conjunction with his use of *mater ecclesia*, which demonstrates he had an explicit knowledge of, and at least a nominal dependence on, the Carthaginian bishop's particular understanding of the church's motherhood. In *On Christian Doctrine*, he references Cyprian's use of *mater ecclesia* in *On the Dress of Virgins* 7.<sup>215</sup> Against the Donatists, in *Against the Letters of Petilianus*, he repeats Cyprian's dictum as a way to combat the Donatists' own claim to inheriting Cyprian's thought: "Therefore, as I have frequently said and strongly impress upon you, whatever kind of person we may be, you, who have God as a father and the church as a

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<sup>214</sup> *ep.* 98.5 (CSEL 34.2:526.14-18, 21-527.3): "offeruntur quippe paruuli ad percipiendam spiritalem gratiam non tam ab eis, quorum gestantur manibus, quamuis et ab ipsis, si et ipsi boni fideles sunt, quam ab uniuersa societate sanctorum atque fidelium... tota hoc ergo mater ecclesia, quae in sanctis est, facit, quia tota omnes, tota singulos parit. nam si christiani baptismi sacramentum, quando unum atque id ipsum est, etiam apud haereticos ualet et sufficit ad consecrationem, quamuis ad uitae aeternae participationem non sufficiat" (Trans. Teske, *NCP* II/1, 429).

<sup>215</sup> *doc. Chr.* 4.21.47.

mother, are secure.”<sup>216</sup> He also cites Cyprian’s argument from *On the Lapsed* 9, that parents deny their children of their true mother, the church, when they subject their children to performing sacrifices, in order to defend the necessity of infant baptism.<sup>217</sup>

However, Augustine also significantly deviates from his North African predecessor. In *On Baptism*, he explicitly rejects Cyprian’s understanding in *On the Unity* 6 and *Epistle* 43 that those baptized outside of the unity of the church are born of adulterous unions; rather, he labels the spirit of the individual who is a sinner or in schism as adulterous.<sup>218</sup> Moreover, he reinterprets or simply avoids the scriptural precedents that Cyprian favored. Augustine does not associate the maternity of the church with images from Song of Songs or identify those outside of *mater ecclesia* with the priestly rebellion against Aaron (Num 16:1-40). This was most likely because these were scriptural precedents the Donatists were using against Catholics, and they simply did not work well with his own maternal portrayal.<sup>219</sup> Augustine also does little with the mother from 2 Maccabees, possibly because the Donatists may have been associating her with *mater ecclesia*, given their emphasis on martyrdom and their position that Catholics were persecuting them. Although Augustine, like Cyprian, parallels *mater ecclesia* with Sarah and Rachel, he uses them differently and argues against the practice of rebaptism.

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<sup>216</sup> *c. litt. Pet.* 3.9.10 (CSEL 52:171.23-25): “itaque, ut saepe dixi et uehementer inculco, qualescumque nos simus, securi estis qui deum patrem et eius ecclesiam matrem habetis” (Trans. author).

<sup>217</sup> *ep.* 98.3-4.

<sup>218</sup> *bapt.* 4.17.

<sup>219</sup> For examples of Donatist use of *Song of Songs* see Aug., *bapt.* 4.10.17; Opt., *de schism. Don.* 2.8 and 13; *Gesta coll.* 3.58; they closely follow Cyprian’s use (*ep.* 69.2). Elizabeth Clark also notices that Augustine rarely cites the Song of Songs except when refuting the Donatist’s use (“The Uses of Song of Songs,” 407-10). See also Michael Cameron, “Augustine’s Use of the Song of Songs against the Donatists,” in *Augustine: Biblical Exegete*, ed. Joseph C. Schnaubelt and Frederick van Fleteren (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 99-127.

Likewise, when Augustine uses Galatians 4:26, it is often to image a heavenly Mother Jerusalem, not a temporal ecclesial community.

Augustine's use of other patristic sources in his development of *mater ecclesia* is more difficult to discern in part because the metaphor, especially in relation to baptism, was very prevalent among patristic writers by the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>220</sup> Maureen A. Tilley asserts that Augustine "inherited some of his Marian materials from Ambrose, but he gave his own interpretation to them" and integrated it into North African ecclesiology; indeed his association of Mary and the church parallels that of Ambrose.<sup>221</sup> Tilley alludes in passing that Augustine may have derived his notion of the heavenly Jerusalem and Rebecca from Victorinus and the pseudo-Cyprianic corpus.<sup>222</sup> It would also seem likely that Optatus's use of *mater ecclesia* may have influenced Augustine as well, due to his use of Optatus's work, *On the Schism of the Donatists*, in his anti-Donatist writings.<sup>223</sup> However, as was the case with Cyprian, Augustine deviates significantly from Optatus. Not only does he differ in how he understands the church's parturition in relation to its members, but he attaches different scriptural references to the

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<sup>220</sup> See Jensen, "Mater Ecclesia and Fons Aeterna," 145-52.

<sup>221</sup> Tilley, "Mary in Roman Africa," 122-3. See also Doyle, "Mary, Mother of God," 543 and Jensen, "Mater Ecclesia and Fons Aeterna," 145-6. Interestingly, Ambrose only uses the actual title *mater ecclesia* twice: *On Repentance*, 2.10 and *On the Sacrament of the Incarnation of the Lord*, 2.13. Augustine's indebtedness to Ambrose's thought before the Pelagian controversy is unclear, see Neil McLynn, "Ambrose of Milan," in *ATAE*, 17-9.

<sup>222</sup> *ad Gal.* 2.4-5. Tilley, "Mary in Roman Africa," 122. There is considerable dispute as to whether or not Augustine had read Victorinus' theological and exegetical works, see Nello Cipriani, "Marius Victorinus," in *ATAE*, 534, and Stephen Andrew Cooper, *Marius Victorinus' Commentary on Galatians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 182-246.

<sup>223</sup> Augustine regarded Optatus among other North African writers, such as Cyprian (*doc. Chr.* 2.40.61). Many of Augustine's anti-Donatist arguments were based on those of Optatus, which is further demonstrated by his explicit citation of Optatus at the Council of Carthage (411) and elsewhere against the Donatists (*ep.* 141.9).

metaphor as well.<sup>224</sup> It seems likely with all of the possible patristic precedents that Augustine inherited the general use of *mater ecclesia* and basic themes surrounding the metaphor, but Augustine was not dependent upon these sources and tailored them to his own ecclesial concerns.<sup>225</sup>

## 2. Scriptural

Whereas preceding North African writers tended only to allude to scriptural precedents, Augustine tied *mater ecclesia* directly to numerous Old Testament and New Testament passages, demonstrating his exegetical creativity and advancement of the ecclesial metaphor. Of the New Testament writings, he relies most heavily on Paul; this is not surprising given Paul's influence on his ecclesiology.<sup>226</sup> Augustine's favorite Pauline text to associate with the empirical *mater ecclesia* was 1 Corinthians 3:2: "I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food." Paul's rebuke to his community in Corinth worked well with Augustine's notion of a mixed ecclesial body against the Donatists as well as to the neophytes who had only recently become members

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<sup>224</sup> Optatus used Ezekiel 13:10 (*de schism. Don.* 3.10) and Psalm 50:17-20 (*de schism. Don.* 4.3). Augustine also cites the *sententia* made by the bishops at the seventh Council of Carthage (256), see *bapt.* 6.17.28 and 6.33.63. Again, this further demonstrates Augustine's explicit knowledge of various thinkers' usages of the metaphor, but it does not demonstrate any particular dependence upon them.

<sup>225</sup> It is also feasible that Augustine's connection of *mater ecclesia* to the heavenly and earthly Jerusalem may have been influenced by Origen (see Ledegang, *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, 203-17).

<sup>226</sup> See C. P. Bammel, "Augustine, Origen and the Exegesis of St. Paul," *Augustinianum* 32 (1992): 341-68, and "Pauline Exegesis, Manichaeism and Philosophy," in *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, ed. L. R. Wickham, C. P. Bammel, and E. C. D. Hunter (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 1-25; Eric Plumer, *Augustine's Commentary on Galatians: Introduction, Text, Translation, and Notes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 89-116; Paula Fredriksen, "Allegory and Reading God's Book: Paul and Augustine on the Destiny of Israel," in *Allegory and Cultural Change*, ed. Jon Whitman (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 124-65.

of the church and still very susceptible to failure.<sup>227</sup> Augustine combines this passage with other nurturing Pauline references, such as 2 Thessalonians 2:7, as well as with Ephesians 3:18-19, and understands the solid food to signify advanced knowledge in the faith and the milk to signify basic doctrinal knowledge and hearing of the Scriptures.<sup>228</sup>

When referencing the church as the pure eschatological communion of saints, Augustine prefers to use Paul's allegorical understanding of Hagar and Sarah in Galatians 4:25-6: "Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother." Reading Galatians 4:25-6 through Hebrews 12:22 and Revelation 21:2, he understands the figure of Sarah to be a type for the eschatological community of saints, mother Jerusalem, which was predicted by the prophets and Psalmists.<sup>229</sup> He also relies on 2 Corinthians 11:2 ("for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ") to articulate his notion that the undefiled true church is simultaneously virginal and fecund.<sup>230</sup>

Aside from the Pauline epistles, Augustine also favors particular passages and narratives from the Gospels in his depiction of the maternal effects of the church. He understands the widow of Nain in Luke 7:11-15 to symbolize the church; just as the widow rejoiced at Jesus' raising of her dead son, Mother Church rejoices when sinners

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<sup>227</sup> *en. Ps.* 8.5, 38.3, 49.27, and 130.11; *ep.* 93.21; *s.* 71.30).

<sup>228</sup> *en. Ps.* 8.5, 49.27; *ep. Jo. tr.* 3.1; *an. quant.* 76; *Jo. ev. tr.* 35.3; *c. ep. Man.* 25; *c. Faust.* 12.47; *s.* 10.8. He also associated John 1:6-9 with this notion (*Jo. ev. tr.* 35.3).

<sup>229</sup> *Jo. ev. trac.* 11.8; *s.* 252.7.

<sup>230</sup> *virg.* 2.2; *s.* 191.3 and 213.8.

are brought back to life from their spiritual death through the grace of Christ.<sup>231</sup> He also utilizes John 3:1-21, the story of Nicodemus, to argue against the Donatist practice of rebaptism that “just as one cannot re-enter the mother’s womb, neither it possible to re-enter the waters of baptism.”<sup>232</sup> Finally, to demonstrate the new familial relationship that exists with Christ, he uses Matthew 12:50: “For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” While individually a Christian is a brother or a sister, as a collective they are the mother of the spiritual Body of Christ.<sup>233</sup>

In part due to a typological tradition inherited from Tertullian and in part due to his own polemic with the Manicheans, Augustine believed that everything in the Old Testament foretold Christ and the Church and utilizes various figures in conjunction with the New Testament to articulate his understanding of the church as mother.<sup>234</sup> He pairs Genesis 2:22 with John 19:34, creating a typological link between the formation of Eve from Adam’s side and the formation of the church and its sacraments from the wound of Jesus, the second Adam; in *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 120.2, he adds Noah’s construction of a door in the ark in Genesis 6:16 to his typological exegesis of John 19:34. Likewise, Augustine calls the church “the mother of the living,” just as Eve was given the same title in Genesis 3:20; however, while Eve was a mother of corrupted life, the church is the mother of eternal life.<sup>235</sup> Whether it is through the figures of Sarah and

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<sup>231</sup> *s.* 98.2 and *Jo. ev. tr.* 49.3.

<sup>232</sup> *Jo. ev. tr.* 11.6 (CCSL 36:114.26-27): “quomodo uterus non potest repeti, sic nec baptismus” (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/12, 217). Cf. *Jo. ev. tr.* 12.2.

<sup>233</sup> *virg.* 5; cf. *c. Faust.* 22.39.

<sup>234</sup> *c. Faust.* 12.8.

<sup>235</sup> *en. Ps.* 126.8; *nupt. et. conc.* 2.4.12.

Rachel, or even the two prostitutes in 1 Kings 3:16-28, Augustine creatively applies all motherly figures in the Old Testament to the church and her motherhood.

### 3. Personal

Carl Springer makes an interesting observation in his article, “The *prosopopoeia* of Church as Mother in Augustine’s *Psalmus contra Partem Donati*” (1987). Springer proposes that Augustine’s perception of his mother Monica influenced his depiction of the church as a mother. Springer’s primary example for this is Augustine’s description of Monica as a peacemaker (*pacifica*) in *Confessions* 9.9.19-22 and his portrayal of Mother Church imploring peace.<sup>236</sup> Springer also points out the close proximity of Augustine’s request to remember Monica and his reference to the church as mother in *Confessions* 9.13.37.<sup>237</sup>

Although it is impossible to prove conclusively that Augustine used his experience with Monica as a template for his understanding of the church as mother, the apparent parallels between the two figures, coupled with Augustine’s conscious recognition of Monica’s importance in his own conversion, strongly suggests that when Augustine thought of his spiritual mother he was thinking of his physical one as well. He refers to the two mothers in similar terms, calling both Monica and the church a handmaid (*ancilla*),<sup>238</sup> and in personal appellation, *mater mea* for Monica and *mater*

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<sup>236</sup> Springer also notes that Augustine used *pax* thirty-four times in the short piece (59).

<sup>237</sup> Springer, “Church as Mother,” 60.

<sup>238</sup> See *conf.* 9.8.18, 9.12.33, and 9.13.36.

*nostra* for the church.<sup>239</sup> Likewise, he mentions the two mothers when he recounts almost being baptized as a youth: “You saw how I pleaded with my loving kindly mother and with the mother of us all, your Church.”<sup>240</sup> This comparison between a biological mother’s concern for a sick unbaptized child and loving reception of the spiritual mother later plays such a pivotal role in his polemic against the Pelagians that is difficult not to see Augustine’s memory of Monica influencing it.

The way Augustine understood the church’s maternity in relation to the Donatists may have been influenced by Monica as well. In *Sermon* 46 (ca. 414), he describes Mother Church as a shepherd who “seeks the strays, strengthens the feeble, cares for the ill, bandages the fractured.”<sup>241</sup> While the mother’s intentions are out of love, Augustine elsewhere acknowledges that the recipient of her focused care may not readily understand the mother’s actions and perceive her more of a burden than a blessing. In *Sermon* 360C (ca. 406), he writes about the church,

And so it’s this doting mother, conceiving and giving birth to her children when their lives are in danger, who hasn’t ignored the sickness of her offspring. Even if she makes a nuisance of herself, even if she is unseasonably importunate, she has come up to their bedsides; she has forcibly fed those who were refusing food. They hate her taking care of them; they should rather be afraid of experiencing her mourning them. She takes care of the sick; she mourns the dead. May she go on being a nuisance.<sup>242</sup>

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<sup>239</sup> Augustine only calls his mother, Monica, once in *conf.* 9.13.37; otherwise, he refers to her as *mater mea* (see for instance, *conf.* 1.11.17).

<sup>240</sup> *conf.* 1.11.17 (CCSL 27:10.8-9): “flagitavi a pietate matris meae et matris omnium nostrum, ecclesiae tuae” (Trans. Boulding, *NCP* I/1, 51).

<sup>241</sup> *s.* 46.18 (CCSL 41:545.449-450): “quaerit errantes, confortat infirmos, curat languidos, alligat contractos” (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/2, 275).

<sup>242</sup> *s.* 360C.6 (Dolb 314.493-497): “ista itaque mater pia, filios suos et conceptos pariens et periclitantes parturiens, non spreuit aegritudinem suorum; etsi molesta, etsi importuna, accessit ad iacentes; cibum ingessit recusantibus. oderunt reficientem, plus timent experiri plangentem. aegrotum reficit, mortuum plangit. sit molesta in eo” (Trans. Hill, *NCP* III/11, 390).



Mother Church, for Augustine, tries to save as many of her children as possible so much so that her rebellious children may see her protective actions as a nuisance. Likewise, Monica continuously attempted to save the young Augustine from mortal danger and to convert him to Christianity; not only did she expel him from home for becoming a Manichean at one point, she also followed him wherever he went in order to protect her wayward son.<sup>243</sup> While he later recollected Monica's persistence in a positive light, the young, upwardly mobile Augustine did not appreciate his mother's care and even abandoned her in Carthage when he went to Rome.<sup>244</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Augustine used the metaphor of *mater ecclesia* throughout his entire career; in fact, he used the ecclesial image with the most frequency of any author to date. As with his ecclesiology, his expression of *mater ecclesia* is complex and dependent on the particular circumstances of the time. Likewise, his maternal metaphor lacked a systematic portrayal and developed throughout his career. On the one hand, he presented the maternity of the church tenderly as nurturing and fecund, especially in a baptismal context. Yet, on the other hand, he also pictured her as a justifiably harsh mother when writing against the Donatists in later years. Whatever context or polemic he encountered, he employed the metaphor of *mater ecclesia*, suggesting its central importance in his ecclesial understanding.

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<sup>243</sup> *conf.* 3.12.21, 6.1.1.

<sup>244</sup> *conf.* 5.8.15.

Augustine was not alone in relying on the metaphor of *mater ecclesia* to explicate the nature of the church. By the fourth century, the notion of the church as mother had become widespread in North Africa from the precedent set by Cyprian. Not only was it employed by both Catholic and Donatist leaders, but it was also becoming manifest visually in church architecture. While Augustine was clearly indebted to this tradition, he did not merely mimic previous uses of the metaphor but advanced it in various ways. This is most evident in his *prosopopoeia* of Mother Church in the *Psalm against the Donatists*, where he provides a voice to Mother Church and further personifies her. He made the most advances of the metaphor in his exegesis of Scripture. Whereas previous writers had only infrequently associated the church's maternity with biblical precedents, Augustine, following his dictum in *Against Faustus*, read maternal references in the Old Testament as typologically referring to the church, especially those pertaining to Jerusalem; moreover, he read the few passages previously employed, such as the story of Sarah and Hagar, to meet his own ecclesial needs. Finally, he associated the church with Mary. Although such an association was implied in Cyprian's *Testimonies*, Augustine explicitly connected the two through the influence of Ambrose and created a Mary-Eve-church typological association, laying the groundwork for later Catholic Mariology.

Despite these differences with his North African predecessors, Augustine nevertheless continued the traditional connotation of the metaphor as an exclusionary figure that functioned to demarcate true membership in the church. Even though his ecclesiology was less oppositional, Augustine still portrayed the church and its maternity as exclusive. However, he perceived this church to be an eschatological reality rather than a temporal one. For him, the physical church was a comprised of both sinners and

saints that participates in the pure church of the saints, which will be historically realized in the eschaton. He shifted exclusivity from the sacrament of baptism to an individual's participation in the unity of saints. His portrayals of *mater ecclesia* follow this shift, yet reflect this retention of ecclesial exclusivity. This is especially evident in his use of *mater ecclesia* against the Donatists, against whom he employed the metaphor the most.<sup>245</sup> For Augustine, although the mother is forgiving and awaits the return of her children whom she even allows to be born and raised by other mothers, the divine inheritance of salvation can only be gained through association with the true mother.

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<sup>245</sup> It should be noted that such use was also exhibited in North African canons concerning the reception of Donatists and the primacy of the Catholic Church (see *reg. Carth.* 57 and 67). The only other time *mater ecclesia* is formerly used in North African canons is in reference to metropolitan sees (see *reg. Carth.* 56 and 123).

## CHAPTER V

### HOLY AND CATHOLIC: *MATER ECCLESIA* IN THE WORKS OF QUODVULTDEUS AND FULGENTIUS

The opening decades of the fifth century proved propitious for Catholicism in North Africa. The Conference of Carthage in 411, under the presidency of the imperial notary, Marcellinus, was the culmination of increasing imperial support against Donatism. Following the conference and Marcellinus's pronouncement in favor of the Catholic cause, Emperor Honorius prescribed the exile of Donatist clergy, confiscation of Donatist property, and monetary punishment for persistent followers.<sup>1</sup> Although Donatism continued, especially in more remote areas,<sup>2</sup> the emperor's edict and sustained imperial support provided Catholics an institutional hegemony.

However, this recently-formed Catholic ascendancy, which was formed through favorable relations with the Roman government, quickly diminished with the arrival of the Vandals in 429.<sup>3</sup> The Vandals not only eliminated state support for Catholics by displacing Roman control over the region, but they brought with them an Arian form of Christianity, which was at odds with the well-established Catholic faith. Catholic Christians now became the targets of an unusually harsh persecution, which led many to

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<sup>1</sup> *cod. Theod.* 16.5.52.

<sup>2</sup> See Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 290-9.

<sup>3</sup> The group that crossed was not a homogeneous one; see Frank M. Clover, "Carthage and the Vandals," in *The Late Roman West and the Vandals* (Brookfield, VT: VARIORUM, 1993), 6.3 and Walter Pohl, "The Vandals: Fragments of a Narrative," in *Vandals, Romans, and Berbers: New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa*, ed. A. H. Merrills (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 31-47. However, as is the convention, the term "Vandals" will be used to designate this entity that crossed in 429.

believe that the end of times was quickly approaching. As François Decret states, “The greatest amount of upheaval to the African church in the early church period was brought on by the Vandal conquest.”<sup>4</sup>

Despite its overall significance for North African history and an abundance of literary and material evidence, limited scholarly attention has been given to the Vandal period of occupation.<sup>5</sup> Prior to A. H. Merrills and Richard Miles’s recent work, *The Vandals*, no comprehensive study on the Vandals was available in English;<sup>6</sup> previously, Christian Courtois’ work, *Les Vandales et l’Afrique* (1955) was held as the standard study.<sup>7</sup> Even less systematic treatment has been afforded to the theological writers of this period.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate, albeit in a limited fashion, the richness of late-antique North African thought by examining the relationship between the

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<sup>4</sup> François Decret, *Early Christianity in North Africa*, trans. Edward L. Smither (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 195.

<sup>5</sup> A. H. Merrills, “Introduction,” in *Vandals, Romans, and Berbers: New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa*, ed. A. H. Merrills (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 16-9.

<sup>6</sup> A. H. Merrills and Richard Miles, *The Vandals* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). See also D. J. Mattingly and R. B. Hitcher, “Roman Africa: An Archeological Review,” *JRS* 85 (1995): 165-213. Frank M. Clover also has produced significant work in this area, which was recently collected in the volume *The Late Roman West and the Vandals* (1993); however, this is not a systematic treatment but a collection of various articles much like Merrills’ *Vandals, Romans, and Berbers: New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa* (2004). Karen Eve Carr has also produced a study concerning the effects of the Germanic migrations on rural populations in *Vandals to Visigoths: Rural Settlement patterns in Early Medieval Spain* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002); however, this is geographically specific and does not canvass the entire Vandal history.

<sup>7</sup> C. Courtois, *Les Vandales et l’Afrique* (Paris: Arts et Métiers Graphiques, 1955). H. J. Diesner’s monograph, although largely based on Courtois, should not be overlooked, *Das Vandalenreich. Aufstieg und Untergang* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1966).

<sup>8</sup> Not until quite recently were selected works from these authors translated. Moreover, there are few extensive studies on these thinkers available in English. The most comprehensive being Daniel Van Slyke’s valuable work, *Quodvultdeus of Carthage: The Apocalyptic Theology of a Roman African in Exile* (Strathfield, NSW: St. Pauls, 2003), which does not cover the whole of Quodvultdeus’ thought. Concerning Victor of Vita and Fulgentius, C. Courtois, H. J. Diesner, and G. G. Lapeyre have produced studies, but they are in need of updating; see C. Courtois, *Victor of Vita et son œuvre* (Algiers: Impremirie Officielle, 1954); H. J. Diesner, *Fulgentius als Kirchenpolitiker und Theologe* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1966), and G. G. Lapeyre, *Saint Fulgence de Ruspe: Un évêque catholique africain sous la domination vandale* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1929).

environmental context of the Vandal invasion and the changed expression of *mater ecclesia* among two Catholic writers from this period: Quodvultdeus of Carthage and Fulgentius of Ruspe. It will be argued that, while the use of *mater ecclesia* continued to arise in contentious ecclesial circumstances, the metaphor was further nuanced and developed in conjunction with concerns surrounding the Vandal occupation of North Africa during the fifth and sixth centuries.

## North Africa under the Vandals

### **1. Vandal Settlement**

Approximately eighty thousand people crossed the Straits of Gibraltar into North Africa under the leadership of Gaiseric in 429.<sup>9</sup> The Vandals, unlike the Visigoths, successfully occupied North Africa and quickly replaced Roman rule, despite a relatively small army.<sup>10</sup> By June of 430, the Vandals traversed western North Africa and began a lengthy siege against the fortified city of Hippo Regius, where refugee clerics and laity had flocked.<sup>11</sup> Within a year Vandals were able to capture Hippo where they most likely maintained their temporary base of operations. The Vandals then defeated the combined

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<sup>9</sup> Vict. Vit., *HP* 1.2 provides the number of individuals and composition, while Possidius, *v. Aug.* 28.4 and Hydat. *Chron.* 90 further describe the composition of the group. While most scholars accept this number, W. Goffart challenges this in *Barbarians and Romans AD 418-584. The Techniques of Accommodation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 231ff. The impetus for their movement is unclear. Most scholars doubt the explanations given by Procopius (*BV* 1.3.23-4) and Jordanes (*Get.* 33.167-9) that the Vandals came to North Africa due to an invitation by Count Boniface for military support against the court at Ravenna. See Andreas Schwarcz, "The Settlement of the Vandals in North Africa," in A.H. Merrills' *Vandals, Romans, and Berbers* (2004), 51-2 and R. W. Mathisen, "Sigisvult the Patrician, Maximinus the Arian, and political stratagems in the Western Roman Empire c. 425-50," *Early Medieval Europe* 8, no. 2 (1999): 173-96.

<sup>10</sup> Salvian, *de gub.* 7.7 and Vict. Vit., *HP* 1.2. F. Clover, "Carthage in the Age of Augustine," in *The Late Roman West* (1993), 5.13. Van Slyke suggests the Vandals were successful because they mastered navigation and obtained a fleet, despite imperial sanctions (*Quodvultdeus of Carthage*, 166).

<sup>11</sup> Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 429.

efforts of Count Boniface and the eastern general, Aspar, which forced Valentinian III to negotiate a peace treaty with the Vandals in 435. This treaty granted the status of *foederati* to the Vandals and conceded the provinces of Mauretania and Numidia to them.<sup>12</sup>

The treaty between Gaiseric and Valentinian III lasted less than four years. With general Aspar having returned to Constantinople and general Aetius dealing with matters in Gaul, Gaiseric took the advantage and attacked Carthage on 19 October 439. In his second sermon entitled, *Concerning the Barbaric Age*, the Carthaginian bishop, Quodvultdeus, describes the violence and terror that ensued during the siege:

Mothers of families [were] led away captive, pregnant women slain, nursing mothers, who with their little ones torn away from their hands and thrown half-dead in the street, neither could keep their sons who were still living nor were permitted to bury their dead ones.<sup>13</sup>

Other chroniclers describe Gaiseric's entrance into Carthage in similar terms and add that Gaiseric reduced many of the Roman elite to slaves and confiscated all valuable items from the Carthaginian citizens.<sup>14</sup> Although attempts were made to check Gaiseric, organizational problems among military leaders and continual pressure from the Huns stymied all imperial efforts.<sup>15</sup> With no advantage for negotiation, Valentinian III was again forced to negotiate a new treaty with Gaiseric in 442. This treaty, however,

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<sup>12</sup> Andreas Schwarcz, "The Settlement of the Vandals in North Africa," 52-3.

<sup>13</sup> Quod., *de barb.* 2 5.8 (CCSL 60:477.26-29): "matres familias captiuas abductas, praegnantes abscisas, nutrices euulsis e manibus paruulis atque in uia semiuiuis proiectis, quae nec uiuos potuerunt filios retinere, nec mortuos permissae sunt sepelire" (Trans. by R. Kalkman in "Two Sermons: *De Tempore Barbarico* Attributed to Quodvultdeus, Bishop of Carthage – A Study of Text and Attribution with Translation and Commentary" (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 1963), 164-5).

<sup>14</sup> Vict. Vit., *HP* 1.12 and Procop., *BV* 1.5.12-15.

<sup>15</sup> Van Slyke, *Quodvultdeus of Carthage*, 172.

solidified the Vandal settlement in North Africa by its cessation of the provinces of Africa Proconsularis, Byzancena, and Tripolitania to the Vandals.<sup>16</sup>

Vandal supremacy in North Africa remained unmitigated for close to eighty years.<sup>17</sup> The largest threat to Vandal control was internal discord resulting from inconsistent political succession and policy.<sup>18</sup> In an attempt to secure stability, Gaiseric issued a regulation for succession in which the eldest among male-decedents assumed leadership.<sup>19</sup> This was, however, not a primogenitor-based system. While Huneric (r. 477-484) was Gaiseric's son and succeeded his father, Gunthamund (r. 484-96) and Thrasamund (r. 496-523) were Huneric's nephews and superseded his son Hilderic who did not reign until 523. As a result, dynastic murders were commonplace in order to influence future succession. This dynastic violence, according to Frank M. Clover, "was one of the immediate causes of the downfall of the Vandals."<sup>20</sup> When Gelimer deposed his cousin, Hilderic (430),<sup>21</sup> it provided Justinian the pretense to breach the imperial treaty with the Vandals and reconquer North Africa.

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<sup>16</sup> Vict. Vit., *HP* 1.13; see Courtois, *Vandales*, 172-5.

<sup>17</sup> Although the eastern emperor, Leo, attempted to reconquer North Africa, the attack ended disastrously for the Byzantine fleet and resulted in Leo's successor, Zeno, signing another treaty with the Vandals in 474, which only served to reinforce Vandal control of North Africa (Procop., *BV* 1.6-7).

<sup>18</sup> Decret largely attributes the fall of the Vandals reign to the collectivization of the Berbers and thinks the Belisarius merely brought about the "death blow" (*Early Christianity in North Africa*, 195); this opinion is held by S. Raven in *Rome in North Africa*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1993), 203-6. Courtois, however, has the stronger position that the small Berber realms in the Atlas Mountains weakened Vandal hegemony between 480 and 533, which then allowed the possibility for Byzantine armies to more easily reconquer North Africa (*Vandales*, 325-52).

<sup>19</sup> D. Claude, "Probleme der vandalischen Herrschaftsnachfolge," *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters*, 30 (1974): 329-55.

<sup>20</sup> Clover, "Carthage and the Vandals," in *The Late Roman West* (1993), 6.3. See also Vict. Vit., *HP* 2.12-13 for Huneric's purging of relatives.

<sup>21</sup> While Hilderic's tolerant policy towards Catholics angered many of the Vandal nobility, the defeat of the Vandal army under Hoamer, Hilderic's nephew, may also have stimulated the Vandal aristocrats to make



## 2. Arian/Vandal Persecution

Arianism had existed in North Africa prior to the arrival of the Vandals in 429. Augustine, for instance, publicly debated and wrote against various Arian leaders.<sup>22</sup> Even Augustine's imperial ally, Boniface, not only used Gothic Arians as soldiers, but he also married an Arian in 426 and allowed his daughters to be baptized as Arians.<sup>23</sup> However, Arian adherents were overwhelmingly outnumbered by Catholics (as well as Donatists), who held a Nicene form of Christology, in which the Father and the Son were understood to share the same nature (*homoousios*). Moreover, with Catholicism being the state-supported form of Christianity, Arianism posed no significant threat to North African Catholics until the arrival of the Vandals.

The Vandal settlement profoundly impacted North African Catholicism.<sup>24</sup> Not only did the Vandal migration create a significant influx of Arians, specifically a *homoian* form that articulated the relationship between the Father and the Son in terms of likeness only,<sup>25</sup> but, as a consequence of replacing the Roman rule, it disestablished and

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Gelimer king, see Roland Steinacher, "The So-called *Laterculus Regum Vandalorum et Alanorum*: A Sixth-century African Addition to Prosper Tiro's Chronicle," in Merrill's *Vandals, Romans, and Berbers* (2004), 180.

<sup>22</sup> See Aug., *On the Trinity, Against an Arian Sermon, Debate with Maximinus an Arian Bishop, Against Maximinus*, and sermons 117, 139, and 140; Possidius, *v. Aug.* 17.

<sup>23</sup> Aug., *ep.* 220.4. See also Schwarcz, "The Settlement of the Vandals in North Africa," 51-2.

<sup>24</sup> Recent scholarship has focused on discerning precisely the extent of impact the Vandals had on politics, culture, and economics in North Africa. While the literary sources often portray the Vandal occupation as one of devastation and continual decline, the material evidence suggests otherwise, thus making broad sweeping claims concerning this period tenuous; the church in Hippo, for instance, was not destroyed but likely used as a Vandal base of operations from 431-439; see Jensen, "Church Buildings in Roman Africa," (forthcoming). For excellent studies on this topic see Merrills and Miles, *The Vandals*, 1-26; Pohl, "The Vandals: Fragments of a Narrative," 31-47; Clover, "Carthage and the Vandals," 6.15-22; Clover, "Emperor Worship in Vandal Africa," in *The Late Roman West* (1993), 7.661-674; J. H. Humphrey, "Vandal and Byzantine Carthage: Some New Archeological Evidence," in *New Light on Ancient Carthage*, ed. J. Pedley (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980), 85-120.

<sup>25</sup> Van Slyke, *Quodvultdeus of Carthage*, 182-8.

attempted to suppress Catholicism. Victor of Vita reports that the churches were particularly targeted for suspected wealth, and he describes the various tortures inflicted upon clerics to surrender personally and corporately held wealth.<sup>26</sup> While some of the wealth was used to enhance and fund Gaiseric's burgeoning kingdom, it was also used by Arian clerics for the purpose of converting Catholics. Like the laxists during Cyprian's absence, the Arians attempted to provide an alternate system of patronage to the needy of North Africa. In his second sermon, *Concerning the Barbaric Age*, Quodvultdeus writes,

And not themselves [Arians] do they deceive, who are seen giving alms from the spoils and plunder taken from the dead, when one man is stripped that another may be clothed. What kind of almsgiving is that, where one man is killed that another may be fed?<sup>27</sup>

Given Quodvultdeus's repeated exhortations, this practice must have been widespread and effective in converting Catholics.<sup>28</sup>

Once pillaged, churches were destroyed, converted into Arian churches, or sometimes used as horse stables.<sup>29</sup> Because many of the clerics were either killed or taken as prisoners of war, panic ensued among the Catholic leaders of North Africa with many of them fleeing along with their congregations; Possidius, for instance, sought refuge in Hippo Regius due to the city's defensive wall.<sup>30</sup> Other clerics simply abandoned their respective sees. The Numidian bishop of Thaive, Honoratus, consulted Augustine on

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<sup>26</sup> *HP* 1.4-6.

<sup>27</sup> *de barb.* 2 8.7 (CCSL 60:480.16-19): "Nec sibi blandiantur, qui de mortuorum praedis ac rapinis facere uidentur elemosynas. Qualis enim elemosyna est, ut unus uestiatur, alius exspolietur? qualis elemosyna est, ut unus pascatur, alius occidatur?" (Trans. Kalkman, "Two Sermons," 169).

<sup>28</sup> *de barb.* 1 10.8 and *de symb.* 1.13.7-10.

<sup>29</sup> Possidius says only the churches of Carthage, Hippo, and Cirta survived the initial Vandal sweep (*v. Aug.* 28). See also *cod. Iust.* 1.27.1.3 and *Prosp., Chron.* 2.747.

<sup>30</sup> *Vict. Vit., HP* 1.4-10 and Possidius, *v. Aug.* 28.

whether it was permissible for clergy to leave under an imminent threat of invasion.

Although Augustine advised him and others that a cleric must stay if there are remaining lay members, many clerics abandoned their churches to hide in the mountains.<sup>31</sup>

When Gaiseric captured Carthage, action against Catholics intensified. The Carthaginian clergy, including Bishop Quodvultdeus, were stripped and exiled, while the *Basilica Restituta* was turned into an Arian church.<sup>32</sup> The Roman senators and *honorati* met a similar fate. Fulgentius of Ruspe's grandfather, Gordianus, was exiled to Italy and his property given to Arian priests.<sup>33</sup> While some Roman leaders were given the opportunity to avoid such consequences by being rebaptized into the Arian faith, refusal to do so was met with death. This was the case with Boniface's son-in-law, Sebastian. When Gaiseric demanded that Sebastian become an Arian to demonstrate his loyalty, Sebastian refused and was executed.<sup>34</sup>

Following the Vandal settlement of North Africa, persecution against Catholics continued sporadically and was fueled by political stratagem and anti-Catholic sentiment.<sup>35</sup> Although Gaiseric had forbade the installation of a Catholic bishop in

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<sup>31</sup> Aug., *ep.* 228.7. Compared with Possidius, *v. Aug.* 28 and Ferrandus, *VF.* 9.

<sup>32</sup> Victor of Vita says all the churches were taken within the walls (*Vict. Vit.*, *HP* 1.15). However, Clover demonstrates that not all churches were taken from Catholics and that the Catholic witnesses sometimes overstate the devastation to the churches ("Carthage and the Vandals," VI.9-10). For a list of the Carthaginian churches, see W. H. C. Frend, "The Early Christian Church in Carthage," in *Excavations at Carthage 1976 Conducted by the University of Michigan*, Vol. 3, ed. J. H. Humphrey (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1977), 23. Cf. *Vict. Vit.*, *HP* 1.23 and Theodoret of Cyrus, *ep.* 52 and 53.

<sup>33</sup> Ferrandus, *VF.* 1. See also *Vict. Vit.*, *HP* 1.15.

<sup>34</sup> *Vict. Vit.*, *HP* 1.19-21. John Moorhead convincingly argues that Gaiseric here, and at other times, was using religion as a pretext; see John Moorhead, *Victor of Vita: History of the Vandal Persecution* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1992), 10 nt. 22.

<sup>35</sup> Gaiseric's motivations are difficult to discern, and a wide range of opinions exist among scholars: religious (see Moorhead, "Introduction," xi), ethnic (see Pohl, "The Vandals," 44), political (see Courtois, *Vandales*, 285-7), or various reasons (see Van Slyke, *Quovultdeus of Carthage*, 194).

Carthage since his expulsion of Quodvultdeus in 439, Valentinian III convinced him otherwise, and Deogratius became the new bishop of Carthage in 454, preaching in the *Basilica Fausti* until his death in 457.<sup>36</sup> Once Valentinian III died, Gaiseric exiled the Carthaginian clergy and reinstated his former policy forbidding bishops to be ordained.<sup>37</sup> At one point, Gaiseric ordered the execution of certain clerics in Africa Proconsularis who had built a church in violation of his decree and also removed three Catholic bishops from their diocese – Possidius of Calma, Novatus of Sitifis, and Severianus of Cera – for not giving into his demands.<sup>38</sup>

Gaiseric's successors continued such anti-Catholic policies, albeit in a more inconsistent fashion than Gaiseric. At the beginning of his reign, Huneric, for instance, allowed Catholics to hold liturgical gatherings publicly and reached an agreement with the emperor Zeno permitting Catholics to have a Carthaginian bishop.<sup>39</sup> Animosity, however, quickly resumed against Catholics when the newly appointed bishop of Carthage, Eugenius, restored the *Basilica Fausti* and brought with him a considerable amount of wealth to be distributed as alms to the needy.<sup>40</sup> This, coupled with Eugenius's

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<sup>36</sup> Vict. Vit., *HP* 1.24-25. See also Clover, "Carthage and the Vandals," 6.10.

<sup>37</sup> Vict. Vit., *HP* 1.29.

<sup>38</sup> Vict. Vit., *HP* 1.37-9. See Courtois, *Vandales*, 170. The fact that Gaiseric did not fully purge his or his sons' courts of Catholics until 457 and that he allowed the Carthaginian church to reopen and exiled clerics to return as part of the peace treaty with Zeno in 474 is further evidence of his inconsistent policy towards Catholics (see Vict. Vit., *HP* 1.43 and 51). For examples of local animosities, see Vict. Vit., *HP* 1.25-8, 30-5, and 41-2.

<sup>39</sup> Vict. Vit., *HP* 2.1-4. As part of the agreement, Catholics were allowed to have an ordained bishop only if Zeno allowed Arian bishops to preach in their own language at Constantinople. After two decades of a vacant chair, Eugenius became the Catholic bishop of Carthage in 581. Although Moorhead (*Victor of Vita*, 26 nt. 7) argues against Courtois's theory (*Victor de Vita*, 20-22) that Eugenius was of eastern origin and came to Carthage with Zeno's legate, Alexander, I think this seems likely given the wealth he displayed at the beginning of his episcopacy; it is possible that a steady flow of money was coming from Constantinople for the purpose of almsgiving as an indirect counter-Arian measure.

<sup>40</sup> Vict. Vit., *HP* 2.6-7, 18.

ability to attract large crowds of people, including some from Huneric's own court, incited Arian bishops, who then convinced Huneric to restrict the ministerial activities of the Carthaginian bishop by stationing guards at the basilica doors to prevent Vandals from attending Catholic services.<sup>41</sup>

Huneric intensified his measures against Catholics in 483. He first required anyone who held a palace or public position to become Arian and Catholics to pay the royal treasury 500 *solidi* to ordain new bishops. Then, Huneric violated his agreement with Zeno and began to exile Catholics who refused to be rebaptized into Arianism.<sup>42</sup> Finally, on 20 May 483, Huneric mandated a council in which "*homoousian*" bishops were to defend their faith from Scripture alone and forbade any Catholic worship before the scheduled debate (1 February 484). While the Catholic bishops were in Carthage, however, Huneric had their churches closed and issued an edict (25 February 484) forbidding Catholic worship and ordering the destruction of all church property.<sup>43</sup> According to Victor of Vita, over five hundred bishops were exiled to Corsica, including Eugenius, and Arian bishops led nightly baptismal raids, breaking into Catholic homes and rebaptizing the occupants.<sup>44</sup>

Systematic persecution against Catholics ended with Huneric's death. Under Gunthamund, Catholic churches were reopened, the shrine of Agileus was restored, and

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<sup>41</sup> Vict. Vit., *HP* 2.8-9.

<sup>42</sup> Vict. Vit., *HP* 2.24-37. Cf. Gregory of Tours, *LH* 2.2-3 and Procop., *BV* 1.8. Over four thousand clerics and laity were banished (*HP* 2.25 and Vict. Tun., *Chron. s.a.* 479).

<sup>43</sup> For the decree, see Vict. Vit., *HP* 3.2-14.

<sup>44</sup> *HP* 3.34- 38.

clergy were recalled, including Eugenius.<sup>45</sup> Animosities against Catholics typically occurred at the local level, as was the case with Fulgentius who was persecuted by the Arian priest, Felix.<sup>46</sup> Although Gunthamund's successor, Thrasamund, banned the ordination of new bishops and exiled those who violated this decree, his measures were never as coercive as Gaiseric's or Huneric's, but Thrasamund chose, rather unsuccessfully, to discredit Catholics through formal debate.<sup>47</sup> Finally, with Hilderic, all anti-Catholic measures were cancelled and exiled clergy were restored. This, along with Justinian's reconquest, ended the Vandal persecution of Catholics in North Africa.<sup>48</sup>

### **3. Catholic Perception of the Vandal Persecution**

The Vandal occupation had just as much of an impact upon Catholic self-understanding in North Africa as did the Roman persecutions three hundred years earlier. As a result of the harsh and often erratic nature of the persecutions, Catholics were to choose between either capitulating to the Arian demands or remaining defiantly Catholic under the threat of physical coercion. Catholic writers from this period highlighted the latter, constructing their accounts into a blended form of history and hagiography for the purpose of inspiring Catholics to remain steadfast in the faith. While Catholicism persevered under Vandal rule, as Averil Cameron states, "it developed a strong sense of

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<sup>45</sup> See Steinacher, "The So-called *Laterculus Regem*," 177-8. Only the Reichenau version of the *Laterculus Regum Vandalorum et Alanorum*, contains this information, and there is debate on sequence of actions.

<sup>46</sup> Ferrandus, *VF* 6-7. There are two testimonies that cast a negative light on Gunthamund's reign regarding his policy towards Catholicism; however, their vagueness affords them little credibility (see Procop., *BV* 1.8 and *Gelasii epistulam ad episcopos Dardaniae* CSEL 35).

<sup>47</sup> Ferrandus, *VF*. 13, 20-21. See also Procop., *BV* 1.8 and Vict. Tun., *Chron. s.a.* 523.

<sup>48</sup> Ferrandus, *VF*. 25. Bonifatius (r. 523-6) became the new bishop of Carthage.

identity, defined by opposition, which was continued into the Byzantine period.”<sup>49</sup>

Catholics found various ways to resist the Arian Vandals. Some refused to abandon their faith, as was the case with Boniface’s son-in-law, Sebastian. Clerics continued to preach and ordain despite the royal decrees against such actions.<sup>50</sup> Others directed their energy toward converting Berbers and Arians; Fulgentius in particular was reportedly renowned for his ability in converting large numbers of people.<sup>51</sup>

The sensibility of resistance and opposition, a historically pervasive characteristic of North African theology, continued during the Vandal occupation and was incorporated in Catholic ecclesiological understanding. Although Augustine was relatively silent on the Vandal incursions, most Christian writers interpreted the invasion and subsequent persecution of Catholics as a form of divine punishment for civic and religious failures.<sup>52</sup>

Quodvultdeus, in a sermon written shortly before Carthage fell to the Vandals, admonishes his audience to repent for their various offenses that have incurred God’s wrath: continuation of the games, focus on wealth and possessions, and continued pagan sacrifices.<sup>53</sup>

This sentiment was repeated among other Christian writers as well. Victor of Vita, in *History of the Vandal Persecution*, blames the persecution on a collective failure to

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<sup>49</sup> Averil Cameron, “Vandal and Byzantine Africa,” in A. Cameron, B. Ward-Perkins, and M. Whitby (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History, XVI. Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, AD 425-600* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 555.

<sup>50</sup> *HP* 1.23, 30, 41; Ferrandus, *VF*. 13 See also Clover, “Carthage and Vandals,” 6.18-9.

<sup>51</sup> Ferrandus, *VF*. 3, 13-14, 20; *HP* 1.37.

<sup>52</sup> While Decret attributes Augustine’s unperturbed attitude to his theological understanding of the worldly affairs (*Early Christianity in North Africa*, 190), it is more likely due to his ailing condition and directed focus on reviewing and amending his works.

<sup>53</sup> *de barb.* 1 1.1. See also *de barb.* 1 4.5 and *de barb.* 2 2.

uphold God's commandments.<sup>54</sup> Salvian held perhaps the harshest condemnation of Carthaginians. In his work, *On the Government of God* (ca. 440), Salvian contrasts the romanesque immoralities of the North Africans – worship of *Dea Caelestis*, sexual impropriety, etc. – with the austerity of the biblically-driven Vandals.<sup>55</sup> While the accuracy of Salvian's portrayal of the Vandals is suspect, since it is not confirmed by other chroniclers, it does nevertheless demonstrate the need Christians felt for explaining the devastating success of the Vandals.

Just as Cyprian understood the threat of Roman persecution under Gallus, many fifth-century Christians also perceived the Vandal invasion as an apocalyptic sign. Daniel Van Slyke in his study, *Quodvultdeus of Carthage: The Apocalyptic Theology of a Roman African in Exile* (2003), demonstrates the centrality of apocalyptic thought in Quodvultdeus's work. According to Van Slyke, Quodvultdeus (via Orosius) understands the Roman Empire to be the last worldly dominion and its inability to stymie the Vandals as an apocalyptic sign.<sup>56</sup> By reading Revelation 17 and Daniel 7 together, Quodvultdeus interprets Gaiseric to be one of the predicted apocalyptic kings who was preparing the way for the Antichrist.<sup>57</sup> Like Cyprian, Quodvultdeus takes 1 John 2:18-19 and Numbers 16 to refer to heretics and their function as destructive instruments of the Antichrist, which Quodvultdeus believed himself to be personally witnessing, as the Vandal Arians were physically destroying churches and spiritually destroying the church's members

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<sup>54</sup> *HP* 3.70.

<sup>55</sup> Salvian, *de gub.* 6.12, 7.13-23, and 8.2-5. However, other writers present a different view of the Vandals in Carthage; see Procop. *BV* 2.6.5-9.

<sup>56</sup> Van Slyke, *Quodvultdeus of Carthage*, 211-8. Quodvultdeus, however, admits openly that not all North Africans share his apocalyptic understanding (*de symb.* 3 8.7).

<sup>57</sup> Van Slyke, *Quodvultdeus of Carthage*, 119-25.



through forced rebaptisms.<sup>58</sup> Other writers too saw signs of the apocalypse, with some even identifying Gaiseric as the Antichrist himself.<sup>59</sup>

Fueled by the experience of persecution and coupled with an apocalyptic sensibility, Catholic writers from this period had a strong sense of urgency toward repentance and divisiveness concerning who belongs to the true church. Quodvultdeus, in particular, repeatedly exhorts his audience to repentance due to the exigency of the present circumstance. Relating the story of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32) to the threat of approaching Vandal destruction, Quodvultdeus preaches to his congregation that the present is a time of repentance for all wayward Christians.<sup>60</sup> Quodvultdeus repeats this call in his apocalyptic treatise, *Book of the Promises and Predictions of God*, which he wrote while in exile following the Vandal capture in Carthage (ca. 445-50).<sup>61</sup> For Quodvultdeus, immediate repentance from the earthly delights that brought about divine punishment through persecution is the necessary condition for eternal happiness (*perpetua felicitas*).<sup>62</sup>

Quodvultdeus also stresses that repentance could only be efficacious if performed within the true church. In his *Third Homily on the Creed*, Quodvultdeus instructs the

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<sup>58</sup> Van Slyke, *Quodvultdeus of Carthage*, 126-33. Victor of Vita interprets the Arian clerics in light of Revelation 13:16ff as having the marks of the beast (*HP* 3.47).

<sup>59</sup> Victorinus Petavionensis, *Commentarii in Apocalypsin*, 13 and 17.3 and Hydatius, *chron.* n. 48 a. 410. Donatists believed this as well; see, *Liber Genealogus* F618 (*MGH AA* 9:195).

<sup>60</sup> *de barb.* 1 7.8.

<sup>61</sup> *de prom.* 2.33.72. See Van Slyke, *Quodvultdeus of Carthage*, 44-8 for dating of the treatise.

<sup>62</sup> *de barb.* 2 12.4 (CCSL 60:484.11-12). As Robert Eno notices, Quodvultdeus's preaching is thematically following the "well-worn track" common in sermons delivered under persecutory conditions; see "Christian Reaction to the Barbarian Invasions and the Sermons of Quodvultdeus," in David Hunter (ed.) *Preaching in the Patristic Age: Studies in Honor of Walter J. Burghardt* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 139-58.

catechumens, “Therefore, the boundary of this sacrament [baptism] is defined through the holy church, seeing that, if anyone should be found without it, they will be estranged from the count of [the church’s] children.”<sup>63</sup> Following North African ecclesiological tradition, Quodvultdeus draws a sharp line between those who are within the church and those who are outside; those who are within the church are able to receive eternal life for keeping God’s commandments, while anyone outside of the church will receive divine punishment.<sup>64</sup>

Since some Catholics were becoming Arian either to avoid persecution or to receive alms from Arian clerics, Quodvultdeus especially stresses perseverance in the Catholic Church and warns against being rebaptized.<sup>65</sup> Heretical churches for Quodvultdeus cannot possibly possess the life-giving spirit required for salvation because they either deny Christ or disrupt the unity of the true church. In the case of Arians, Quodvultdeus argues that they exhibit both forms of denial by rejecting the consubstantiality of the Trinity and practicing rebaptism.<sup>66</sup> Quodvultdeus also emphasizes 1 John 2:18-19 (“As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they did not belong to us”) and believes whoever was outside of the church was necessarily working against it as part of the apocalyptic unfolding leading to the end of times.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> *de symb.* 3 13.1 (CCSL 60:363.1-3): “Propterea huius conclusio sacramenti per sanctam ecclesiam terminatur, quoniam si quis absque ea inuentus fuerit, alienus erit a numero filiorum” (Trans. author).

<sup>64</sup> *de prom.* 1.2.4 and 1.36.51-2; *de barb.* 2 12.6 and 3 1.18.

<sup>65</sup> *de prom.* D.14.23; *de barb.* 1 8.10 and 2 13.

<sup>66</sup> *de prom.* 1.26.50, 1.36.50, 2.27.57; *de symb.* 1 13.8.

<sup>67</sup> *de prom.* 1.7.11 and D.5.7; *de symb.* 3 1.3ff.

Given his experience of the Vandal persecution, Quodvultdeus maintains that heretics, especially Arians, would be consumed in eternal fire for their actions against the church.<sup>68</sup>

Fulgentius of Ruspe (ca. 467-532) continues the same divisive ecclesiology exhibited by Quodvultdeus, despite his lack of apocalyptic concerns, due to their shared polemic against Arian Vandals and their Augustinian theological heritage.<sup>69</sup> Concerning those outside of the church, Fulgentius states,

Whoever is outside this church, which has received the keys to the kingdom of heaven, is not walking the path to heaven but to hell; nor is a person heading toward the house of eternal life but is hastening toward the punishment of eternal death; [this is the case] not only if a person remains a pagan without baptism, but also if a person, having been baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, persists as a heretic.<sup>70</sup>

For him, nothing outside of the church, not even martyrdom, could profit towards an individual's salvation, since only the church possessed the life-giving Holy Spirit.<sup>71</sup>

Explicitly citing Cyprian, Fulgentius interprets the church to be prefigured in Noah's ark, one of his favored images for portraying the exclusivity of the church.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *de prom.* 2.21.41.

<sup>69</sup> Both Quodvultdeus's and Fulgentius's indebtedness to Augustine's ecclesiology is widely accepted; see Van Slyke, *Quodvultdeus of Carthage*, 255-86; R. J. de Simone, "The Baptismal and Christological Catechesis of Quodvultdeus," *Augustinianum* 25 (1985): 265-282; Thomas Finn, "Quodvultdeus: The Preacher and the Audience. The Homilies on the Creed," *SP* 31 (1997): 43-44; Robert Eno, "Introduction," in *Fulgentius: Selected Works* (Washington DC: The Catholic University Press of America, 1997), xv; Thomas Smith, "Fulgentius," *ATAE*, 373-4.

<sup>70</sup> *de remiss. pecc.* 1.19.2 (CCSL 91A:667.674-79): "Ab hac ecclesia quae claves regni caelorum accepit, quisquis foris est, non caeli uiam graditur, sed inferni; nec tendit ad aeternae uitae domum:: sed currit ad mortis aeternae supplicium; non solum si remaneat sine baptismo paganus, sed etiam si in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti baptizatus perseueret haereticus" (Trans. author).

<sup>71</sup> *ad Pet.* 36.79-39.82.

<sup>72</sup> *de remiss. pecc.* 1.20.1ff and *ad Pet.* 37.80.

According to Fulgentius, an individual's inclusion into the true church requires two conditions: baptism and perseverance in the morals and teaching of the church. Concerning the former, Fulgentius follows the Augustinian tradition and asserts that baptism can exist outside of the Catholic Church, but such a baptism lacks efficacy in regard to the forgiveness of sins.<sup>73</sup> Baptism is not necessarily sufficient for Fulgentius; an individual must also persevere in the faith and discipline of the church, which temporally is a mixed body of sinners and saints.<sup>74</sup> Like Augustine, Fulgentius separates the temporally visible church from the heavenly church of the saints. Inclusion in the latter required perseverance in the unity of the Church with correct faith and practice, to abandon either was a denial of the Holy Spirit that binds the Body of Christ together and a loosing from the community through which salvation was granted.<sup>75</sup>

### *Mater Ecclesia in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries*

#### **1. Quodvultdeus**

The metaphor *mater ecclesia* played a central role in Quodvultdeus's thought. More than his North African predecessors, he appositively added to the maternal title of the church. Preferring the title Holy Mother Church (*sancta mater ecclesia*), Quodvultdeus also referred to *mater ecclesia* as "virgin" (*virgo mater ecclesia*) and

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<sup>73</sup> *ad Pet.* 36.79. Interestingly, Fulgentius does give some efficacy to baptisms outside of the church; however, he ascribes them only the psychological effect of assuaging personal torment but refuses any salvific role.

<sup>74</sup> *de remiss. pecc.* 1.18.1.

<sup>75</sup> *ad Pet.* 39.82-3, 40.83, 44.87; *ep.* 8.1.1; *ad Mon.* 2.11.1-2.

“catholic” (*catholica mater ecclesia*).<sup>76</sup> Although he seemingly relied on Augustine’s portrayal of *mater ecclesia*, he was not completely bound by it. He fitted the maternal metaphor to the ecclesial concerns of his day. Not only did Quodvultdeus draw a closer connection between *mater ecclesia* and Mary, but he also incorporated an apocalyptic element, which significantly differed from Augustine who avoided any such reading of history.<sup>77</sup>

Quodvultdeus found *mater ecclesia* to be a useful metaphor in his creedal homilies given a week before Easter to the *competentes*.<sup>78</sup> Delivered while still a deacon (ca. 434-6), his sermons highlight many of the same maternal attributes of the Church found in Augustine’s creedal homilies: fecundity, nourishment, and rebirth.<sup>79</sup> Following his defense of the Catholic Church’s Trinitarian beliefs against those of the Arians, Quodvultdeus explains the nature of the church, which the *competentes* have been preparing themselves to join:

Holy Mother the Church, who bore your brothers and sisters with the highest spiritual joy, has conceived you in the womb through this most holy sign of the cross; how long will it be, new offspring of such a future mother, before she restores you reborn through the washing, to the true light, feeds those whom she carries in her womb with proper food, and joyfully conducts you, rejoicing, to the day of birth?<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> *sancta* = *de symb.* 1 1.3, 2.1, 12.16, 13.11; *de symb.* 3 1.1; *de acc. grat.* II.12; *de cant.* 10; *virgo* = *de prom.* II.15; *catholica* = *de acc. grat.* I.8; he also appositively adds the adjectives beautiful (*pulchra*), chaste (*casta*), and true (*vera*) to the title of *mater ecclesia* in *de acc. grat.* II.12.

<sup>77</sup> Paula Fredriksen, “Tyconius and Augustine on the Apocalypse,” in *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, ed. Richard K. Emerson and Bernard McGinn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 20-37. See also W. H. C. Frend, “Augustine and Orosius: On the End of the Ancient World,” *AugStud* 20 (1989): 1-38.

<sup>78</sup> For an overview of the introductory rites in Carthage at this time, see Finn, *Quodvultdeus of Carthage*, 3-8 and Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 771-5.

<sup>79</sup> *de symb.* 1 1.3, 12.16, 13.1; *de symb.* 3 1.1; *de acc.* 2 12.7.

<sup>80</sup> *de symb.* 3 1.1 (CCSL 60:349.1-6): “Dum per sacratissimum crucis signum uos suscepit in utero sancta mater ecclesia, quae sicut et fratres uestros cum summa laetitia spiritaliter pariet, noua proles futura tantae matris, quousque per lauacrum sanctum regeneratos uerae luci restituat, congruis alimentis eos quos portat

He likens the *competentes* to spiritual fetuses whose conception began when they received the sign of the cross, which occurred after an individual had enrolled as a catechumen.<sup>81</sup>

Again, in the *Second Homily on the Creed*, Quodvultdeus explains to the *competentes*,

The last part of this mystery [of the creed] is completed through the church – that mother fertile, virginal, and chaste, spread abroad everywhere, who bears spiritual children for God, who nourishes infants spiritually with the milk of his words, who teaches the old prudence, and who makes the more advanced in age venerable... She recalls the wandering children, deeply laments the dead, and feeds with himself those who persevere without fail. This church, beloved, let us love; may all of us cleave inseparably to such a mother, so loving, so caring, so mindful. With and through her thus may we deserve to be perpetually united to God the Father.<sup>82</sup>

Just as Augustine asserted, Quodvultdeus does not consider the *competentes* to be fully children of God yet. They first had to be spiritually reborn in the parturient waters of *mater ecclesia*. Possibly alluding to Paul (1 Cor 3:1-2), he compares Scripture and the teaching of the church to milk, which would spiritually nourish and protect the *competentes* from the devil during their process in becoming Christian. For

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pascat in utero, et ad diem partus sui laetos laeta perducatur” (Trans. Finn, *Quodvultdeus of Carthage: The Creedal Homilies*, 23).

<sup>81</sup> *de symb. 1 1.3.* Finn, *Quodvultdeus of Carthage: The Creedal Homilies*, nt. 1, pg. 121. For a good summation of the entire process see either Edward Yarnold’s *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the R.C.I.A.*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 2-17 or Everett Ferguson’s *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 771-5.

<sup>82</sup> *de symb. 2 12.7-8,10* (CCSL 60:348.20-27, 31-34): “Ideo sacramenti huius conclusio per ecclesiam terminatur, quia ipsa est mater fecunda, integra et casta, ubique diffusa, quae filios deo spiritaliter parit, quae paruulos lacte uerborum eius spiritaliter nutrit, quae pueros sapientiam docet, quae adolescentes a luxuria atque impudicitia sua sancta castitate custodit, quae iuuenes robore uirtutis contra diabolum armat, quae senes prudentiam docet, quae seniores aetate prouectos uenerabiles facit... omnes tali matri sic amanti, sic prospicienti, sic consulenti inseparabiliter inhaereamus: ut simul cum illa et per illam deo patri perpetuo coniungi mereamur” (Trans. Finn, *Quodvultdeus of Carthage: The Creedal Homilies*, 65-6).

Quodvultdeus, the creed in particular protects a catechumen from the poison of the devil, which can abort them before they are spiritually born.<sup>83</sup> The catechumens could only receive the Eucharist, which he calls the proper food of *mater ecclesia*, when they completed their process and were successfully reborn in baptism.<sup>84</sup>

The parturient conceptualization of the church is not only evident in the works of Quodvultdeus but also architecturally in the baptismal font of the Basilica of Vitalis (Sbeitla, Tunisia). The Basilica of Vitalis was built sometime during the Vandal occupation of North Africa in the fifth or sixth century, presumably to meet the needs of a growing Catholic congregation.<sup>85</sup> An inscription in the central nave indicates that Vitalis was a presbyter in Sufetula and suggests he was martyred during the tumultuous reign of Gaiseric on September 14<sup>th</sup>, 467 with his remains buried under the central nave.<sup>86</sup> The baptistery, which may have been funded by Vitalis and his wife,<sup>87</sup> was modeled after the font in the Chapel of Jucundus with the font in the same unusual labial shape (see fig. 3). As demonstrated with Augustine, the font was regarded as the womb of Mother

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<sup>83</sup> *de symb.* 3 1.4. Finn, *Quodvultdeus of Carthage: The Creedal Homilies*, nt.4, pg. 122. This also may be an allusion to 1 Cor 15:8.

<sup>84</sup> *de symb.* 3 13.11.

<sup>85</sup> Jensen, "Church Buildings in Roman Africa," (forthcoming). Jensen suggests that the former baptistery, the Chapel of Jucundus, was transformed into a shrine following the construction of the Basilica of Vitalis. Jucundus, listed as one of the Catholic bishops present at the 411 and 419 Councils of Carthage (*Col. Carth.* 1.126, 207), may have been martyred during the initial Vandal incursion; the inscription as well as the possible relic niche found in one of the columns suggests this. See also See Duval and Baratte, *Sufetula*, 44-7.

<sup>86</sup> ILCV 2.3477: "In nomine Patris et Fi/li(i) et Sp(iritu)s S(an)c(ti), amen/Vitalis Pr(e)sb(yter) ui(xit in pace)/ d(e)i annis XXXVIII re(q)ui(esco ho?)/die hic positus pla(cidia in)/pace reserbor pulberi/spes mic(h)i multa manet na(m te)/uenturum spero d(omi)n(u)m qui cuncta/creasti tibi ut cinere(s) istos/suscites ipse potens h(a)ec est/speciosor sole et super omnem/s(t)ellarum dispositionem/luci comparata invenitur prior/dum sit una omnium potens et/in se permanens omnia inno/dans natus anno XXVIII/Regis Gerisic pridie idus/Septembres."

<sup>87</sup> Jensen and Burns, "Church Buildings in Roman Africa," (forthcoming).

Church in North Africa, and the font in Sufetula reinforced this notion concretely.

Describing the process and potential effect such a font might have had on initiates, Robin

Jensen states,

Candidates would enter from one direction (presumably the west) and stand in the well of the font to be baptized. Emerging, then, from the Mother Church's vagina, they would climb out on the opposite side (the east) and present themselves, wet and naked, as new-born babies, ready to join their siblings.<sup>88</sup>

Continuing throughout the fifth century, fecundity remained a dominant motif in North African ecclesial literature and was occasionally represented in its architecture as well.

Although Quodvultdeus portrays *mater ecclesia* as nurturing and fecund, he also emphasizes the boundaries of the church through his use of the maternal metaphor. In explaining to the *competentes* what their new birth will entail, he states in his *First Homily on the Creed*,

Beloved, flee the spectacles, flee the devil's most wicked theater seats, lest the chains of the evil one bind you. But if your soul must be entertained, and it delights in being a spectator, Holy Mother Church displays wholesome spectacles for veneration which may entertain your minds by their attraction and not destroy but guard the faith in you.<sup>89</sup>

Quodvultdeus reminds the *competentes* that their new birth from Mother Church meant avoiding the trappings of secular life, especially the lewdness of the theaters and violence of the games. Roman spectacles were still popular in Carthage at this time. The circus in Carthage was the largest structure in North Africa, able to house forty to forty-five thousand people, and it continued to be operational and heavily attended throughout the

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<sup>88</sup> Jensen, "*Mater Ecclesia and Fons Aeterna*," 153.

<sup>89</sup> *de symb. 1 2.1-2* (CCSL 60: 307.72-307.8): "Fugite, dilectissimi, spectacula, fugite caueas turpissimas diaboli, ne uos uincola teneant maligni. Sed si oblectandus est animus, et spectare delectat, exhibet uobis sancta mater ecclesia ueneranda ac salubria spectacula, quae et mentes uestras oblectent sua delectatione, et in uobis non corrumpant, sed custodiant fidem" (Trans. Finn, *Quodvultdeus of Carthage: The Creedal Homilies*, 25).



Vandal reign.<sup>90</sup> Although Christians were instructed not to attend the games, Quodvultdeus's repeated admonishments against them suggest that many from his congregation probably frequented the circus. To counter the draw of the games, Quodvultdeus presents *mater ecclesia* as a locative competitor, claiming the church provides a superior spectacle to what the city of Carthage could offer them.<sup>91</sup>

Quodvultdeus especially sets the Church's exclusive maternity against Arianism.

In his *Third Homily on the Creed*, he declares,

Therefore, the boundary of this sacrament [baptism] is defined through the holy church, seeing that, if anyone should be found without it, they will be estranged from the count of [the church's] sons. For no one will have God as a father, who does not wish to have the church as a mother; and there is nothing of such great good that anyone has believed or done outside the boundary of the highest good that will be of avail for him or her. Mother Church is of a spiritual nature; the church is the Bride of Christ...For when that spouse looks back upon it, you yourselves [Arians] will be expelled just as the servant girl with her sons, because the sons of the servant girl are not heirs along with the children of the freeborn [wife].<sup>92</sup>

This passage demonstrates Quodvultdeus's break with Augustine's understanding of the relationship of heretics to *mater ecclesia*. In order to fit the metaphor of Mother Church with the changed liturgical practice of ending rebaptism, Augustine countered the notion that other churches were false mothers and argued that their loss of salvific inheritance was due to their disassociation with the true mother; for him, any baptism performed with

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<sup>90</sup> For the remains of the circus, see Naomi Norman, "Excavations in the Circus at Carthage," *Archaeology* 40 (1987): 46-57. Concerning its continuation, see Clover, "Carthage and the Vandals," 10-11.

<sup>91</sup> Finn suggests that *mater ecclesia* was pitted against the cults of Tanit and Juno ("Introduction," 14-5). However, this would only be the case if Quodvultdeus identified Mary with the church, since it is Mary that he directly pits against Juno (see *de symb. 1* 2.13) with the church against civic practices.

<sup>92</sup> *de symb. 3* 13.1-2, 6 (CCSL 60:363.1-7, 19-21): "Propterea huius conclusio sacramenti per sanctam ecclesiam terminatur, quoniam si quis absque ea inuentus fuerit, alienus erit a numero filiorum: nec habebit deum patrem, qui ecclesiam noluit habere matrem; nihil que ei ualebit quod credidit uel fecit tanta bona sine fine summi boni. Ecclesia mater est spiritualis: ecclesia sponsa christi est...Cum enim respexerit ille sponsus, eicieris tu ut ancilla cum filiis tuis; quoniam non erunt haeredes filii ancillae cum filiis liberae" (Trans. author).

the words of the gospel (Mt 28:19) is valid, including those performed by Arians.<sup>93</sup> Quodvultdeus instead follows Cyprian, explicitly quoting *On the Unity of the Church* 6, and categorizes Arian priests and their followers as children born of a false mother. Although Quodvultdeus's choice of using a Cyprianic portrayal does not correspond well with the accepted liturgical custom, which admitted the existence of baptisms outside of the Catholic Church and rejected the practice of rebaptism, it suggests that Quodvultdeus perhaps understood the church and its maternity in a more terrestrial and visibly demarcating fashion than did Augustine.

Quodvultdeus presents *mater ecclesia* as an exclusive mother. For him, the sacrament of baptism marks those who are within the Catholic Church's boundaries. Anything outside of the church is unable to receive the inheritance of salvation, since only the church functions as the true mother.<sup>94</sup> Quodvultdeus warns his listeners of the danger in straying from the Catholic Church; anything outside of the church's teaching cannot be entertained but must be immediately avoided. For those who have strayed, he stresses that the only hope for salvation is to return to their mother.<sup>95</sup> Thus, his application of the motherly metaphor is largely a continuation of North African thought set by Cyprian and advanced by Augustine. While he portrays the mother as fecund and nourishing, Quodvultdeus still emphasizes the church as a demarcating boundary, guaranteeing the inheritance of the divine covenant to those who associate with it.

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<sup>93</sup> Aug., *bapt.* 3.15.20 and *en. Ps.* 77.2.

<sup>94</sup> *de cant. nou.* 10.1. For a recent translation of the text, see Michael W. Heintz, "Quodvultdeus of Carthage, *The New Song*," *Antiphon* 4, no. 2 (1999): 43-48.

<sup>95</sup> *de symb. I* 13.11-13.

Quodvultdeus's most significant contribution to the development of *mater ecclesia* in North Africa was his typological exposition of the metaphor. As Daniel Van Slyke demonstrates through his study of Quodvultdeus's *Book of the Promises and Predictions of God*, typology was central to his theological understanding.<sup>96</sup> He maintains Augustine's position that everything in Scripture points signifies Christ and the church.<sup>97</sup> Like Augustine, Quodvultdeus understands the church to be historically present and prefigured in the Old Testament. However, he goes beyond Augustine's interpretation, perceiving the present church to be part of the historical progression towards the end of times.

Like his North African predecessors, Quodvultdeus principally understands the church to be figured in Eve and recapitulates the sentence incurred by her.<sup>98</sup> Like Augustine, he validates this understanding by pairing Genesis 2:22 with John 19:34:

Just as when Eve was made from the side of a sleeping Adam, so the church was formed from the side of Christ, hanging on the cross. For his side was pierced, as the gospel says, and immediately there flowed out blood and water, which are the twin sacraments of the church: the water which became her bath; the blood, which became her dowry...At the very moment her spouse dies, the bride marries him. At the moment he is joined to his bride, he is severed from mortals. At the moment he is raised above the heavens, she is made fruitful throughout the whole earth.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Van Slyke counts the use of *figurare* and *figura* over one hundred and twenty times in Quodvultdeus's *Book of Promises and Predictions of God*.

<sup>97</sup> *de prom.* 1.33.45, cf. *Aug., c. Faust.* 12.8.

<sup>98</sup> Like Augustine, Quodvultdeus also considers other biblical and historical individuals typologically. Quodvultdeus saw Eve as a type for Perpetua and Felicity and Adam for Job (*de barb.* 1 6.6).

<sup>99</sup> *de symb.* 1 6.4-5, 11 (CCSL 60:320.14-19, 321.40-43): "ut quomodo eua facta est ex latere adae dormientis, ita et ecclesia formetur ex latere christi in cruce pendentis. Percussum est enim eius latus, ut euangelium loquitur, et statim manavit sanguis et aqua, quae sunt ecclesiae gemina sacramenta. Aqua, in qua est sponsa purificata: sanguis, ex quo inuenitur esse dotata...et tunc sponsa nubit, quando sponsus moritur; et tunc ille sponsae coniungitur, quando a mortalibus separatur: quando ille super caelos exaltatur, tunc ista in omni terra fecundatur" (Trans. Finn, *Quodvultdeus of Carthage: The Creedal Homilies*, 39).

Both Augustine and Quodvultdeus understand Eve's creation from and marriage to Adam to signify the church's creation from and marriage to Christ. Quodvultdeus, however, deviates from Augustine by relocating the point of union between the church and Christ. While Augustine tied the marriage between Christ and the church to the Incarnation, placing the wedding chamber in Mary's womb, Quodvultdeus interprets it more sacrificially, and possibly with Song of Songs in mind, places their marriage at the point of separation between the bride and bridegroom. With the water and blood from Christ's side identified as the sacramental dowry given to the church, he emphasizes that Christians through participation in the sacraments are wedded to Christ.<sup>100</sup> This pairing of Genesis 2:22/3:15-16 and John 19:34 was pivotal in his thought, as evinced by his repeated use of it in *On the Disaster*, and in doing so, Quodvultdeus exhibits a stronger notion of the church's tangibility in connecting individual members to Christ, which is more reminiscent of Cyprian than Augustine.<sup>101</sup>

Quodvultdeus also perceives a relationship among Eve, the church, and Mary.<sup>102</sup> Like Augustine, he considers Eve to figure Mary and the church and assigns both a complementary role in the recapitulation process of salvation. In *Second Homily on the Creed*, he states,

The proud Adam, the humble Christ; through a woman death, through a woman life; through Eve destruction, through Mary salvation. The corrupt one followed the seducer; the pure one bore the Savior...He it is who offers fertility to the mother, but does not take away virginity. What he

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<sup>100</sup> Augustine does parallel the formation of Eve with John 19:34 and the formation of the sacraments, which function to establish the temporal church (*en. Ps.* 138.2 and *Jo. ev. tr.* 9.10).

<sup>101</sup> *De catacly.* 4.9-10. See also *de symb.* 3 13.2.

<sup>102</sup> *de symb.* 3 1.4-6. Finn demonstrates that Quodvultdeus also (via Augustine, see *enar.* 86.7-8) saw mother Zion as a type for Mary in *de symb.* 1 5.5 (*Quodvultdeus of Carthage: The Creedal Homilies*, ed.nt. 44-6, pg. 103).

conferred on his mother, this he has given his spouse. In short, Holy Church, who, without spot, has been united to him, the spotless one, daily gives birth to his members yet is a virgin.<sup>103</sup>

Both Augustine and Quodvultdeus hold that Christ confers the attribute of virginity onto Mary and the church. However, Quodvultdeus, possibly with Song of Songs in mind, incorporates purity language into his ecclesiology and adds the notion of spotlessness as an attribute of the church as well, something which Augustine seems to have avoided due to his polemic with the Donatists.<sup>104</sup> Quodvultdeus, who did not deal directly with the Donatists, uses purity language to draw a sharply discernible ecclesial boundary, a common characteristic in apocalyptic thought and literature.<sup>105</sup> As such, his portrayal of Mary and the church sharing not only virginal fecundity but also spotlessness suggests that he fused Cyprian's purity language and tangible ecclesial exclusivity with Augustine's typological understanding.

Quodvultdeus also deviates from Augustine's typological understanding of the church by associating it with the pregnant woman in Revelation 12:1-4. Unlike Augustine, he readily associates the two female figures and in doing so provides the church a pivotal role in the apocalyptic unfolding of history. Although present in his early

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<sup>103</sup> *de symb.* 2 4.25, 27-8 (CCSL 60.340.71-74, 341.78-82): "Adam superbus, humilis christus: per feminam mors, per feminam uita; per euam interitus, per mariam salus. Illa corrupta secuta est seductorem; haec integra peperit saluatorem... qui attulit matri fecunditatem, sed non abstulit integritatem. Quod contulit matri suae, hoc donauit et sponsae suae. Denique sancta ecclesia quae illi integro integra coniuncta est, cotidie parit membra eius, et uirgo est" (Trans. Finn, *Quodvultdeus of Carthage: The Creedal Homilies*, 57-8).

<sup>104</sup> *de symb.* 1 6.4-11 and 3 4.22; *de prom.* 2.15. Here Quodvultdeus further expands on the notion the fecund virgin-mother-church (*ecclesiam virginem matrem*) through his reading of Psalm 112 (113), 1 John 3:2, and Romans 8:17.

<sup>105</sup> For the characteristics of the genre and worldview that most scholars accept, see John J. Collins, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," in *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre*, Semeia 14, ed. John J. Collins (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 9 and Adela Yarbro Collins, "Introduction: Early Christian Apocalypticism," in *Early Christian Apocalypticism: Genre and Social Setting*, Semeia 36, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Decatur: Scholars Press, 1986), 7.

career, Quodvultdeus's apocalyptic understanding of Mother Church intensified when, as the Carthaginian bishop, he was exiled following the Vandal capture of Carthage.<sup>106</sup> In *Book of the Promises and Predictions of God*, he explicitly juxtaposes Genesis 2:21-4/3:15-16 and John 19:34 with Revelation 12:14 to argue that the church is the true mother of the living while Eve is the mother of those living sinfully or outside of the church; he identifies heretics in particular as helpers of the serpent who attacks the mother in Revelation 12.<sup>107</sup> Despite the presently experienced calumnies, however, he assures his audience that just as the mother in Revelation is protected from the serpent, which is eventually destroyed, so too Christ will protect Mother Church and vindicate her at the end of times by destroying all of her enemies.<sup>108</sup>

## 2. Fulgentius of Ruspe

Fulgentius's writings contain the last extant testimony to the *mater ecclesia* tradition in North Africa.<sup>109</sup> Like Quodvultdeus, he wrote against the Arian occupiers of North Africa, was exiled under Vandal rule, and relied on Augustine's ecclesiology and

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<sup>106</sup> For an example of his early apocalyptic understanding of Mother Church, see *de symb.* 3 1.4-6, which he composed when he was a deacon.

<sup>107</sup> *de prom.* 1.1.3.

<sup>108</sup> *de prom.* 2.27.57.

<sup>109</sup> Victor of Vita's *History of the Vandal Persecution* makes a few explicit and implicit references to *mater ecclesia*; while his usage further attests to the pervasiveness of the metaphor in the North African mindset, especially in the context of persecution, his uses are incidental. In *HP* 1.21, Sebastian refers to the Catholic mother in his confessional speech to Gaiseric. Victor, whose historical martyrologies are colored by previous accounts, portrays Dionysias like the mother from 2 Maccabees in *HP* 3.23 (see Danuta Shazner, "Intentions and Audiences: History, Hagiography, Martyrdom, and Confession in Victor of Vita's *Historia Persecutionis*," in *Vandals, Romans, and Berbers*, 271-90, and Phillip Wynn, "Rufinus of Aquileia's *Ecclesiastical History* and Victor of Vita's *History of the Vandal Persecution*," *Classica et Mediaevalia* 41 (1990): 187-198). In *HP* 3.38, the stripped Catholics awaiting exile quote Job 1:21 ("Naked I can from my mother's womb") seemingly in reference to the church. Finally, Victor may be indirectly referencing Revelation 12 when he refers to the laboring church in his appeal to the patriarchs (*HP* 3.69).

Trinitarian thought. Despite these similarities, there were significant experiential differences between him and Quodvultdeus, which inevitably impacted their particular portrayals of *mater ecclesia*. First, he was born twenty-five years after the Vandals had solidified their control of North Africa and did not experience the sudden incursion as Quodvultdeus did; as a result, Fulgentius lacks the apocalyptic concerns held by the Carthaginian bishop.<sup>110</sup> Second, whereas Quodvultdeus seems to have been more concerned with maintaining the present church due to his anticipation of the end times, Fulgentius concentrated on reconciling Catholics who had become Arian and attracting Vandal Arians to Catholicism; thus, most of his ecclesiological discussions occur in his works on forgiveness and penance. Finally, as one scholar notes, he was unreflectively reliant on Augustine's theology and mimicked Augustine's ecclesiology in almost every respect; as a result, Fulgentius was more faithful to Augustine in his conceptualization of Mother Church than was Quodvultdeus.<sup>111</sup>

Like all North African writers, Fulgentius frequently appeals to the exclusivity of Mother Church. In a letter written to Donatus, he states, "Whether one is nourished by milk or fed by food within the Catholic Church, only if he does not go away from the lap of mother church, will he remain a participant in life, because, holding on to the righteousness of faith, he will possess life as well."<sup>112</sup> Again in his treatise, *On the Forgiveness of Sins*, he writes, "With the bosom of the Catholic Church having been

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<sup>110</sup> Only in *Fragments against Fabian* is the church discussed in relation to a heavenly figure (*Fab. frag.* 34), but this is no different than Augustine.

<sup>111</sup> Only in his letter to Proba (*ep.* 3.9) does Fulgentius rely on Jerome's etymological analysis to link Eve with the Church.

<sup>112</sup> *ep.* 8.1.1 (CCSL 91:257.20-23): "Siue autem quis intra ecclesiam catholicam lacte nutriatur, siue cibo pascatur, tantum si a sinu matris ecclesiae non recesserit, uitae particeps permanebit; quia tenens fidei iustitiam, possidebit et uitam" (Trans. Eno, *Fulgentius: Selected Works*, 366).

forsaken, they having been corrupted by a blindness of the heart move toward heresies or schisms... He knows also that nowhere else than in the bosom of the Catholic mother alone are sins able to be remitted for the converted.”<sup>113</sup> Fulgentius, like Augustine, relies on Cyprian’s *On the Unity of the Church*, which he cites directly, as well as Cyprian’s typological understanding of Noah’s ark to convey the Church’s exclusivity.<sup>114</sup> He also prefers to title the Church *sancta mater ecclesia* or *catholica mater ecclesia*, rather than simply *mater* or *mater ecclesia*, possibly to further demarcate the maternity of the Catholic Church from its Arian competitor, as Quodvultdeus had done earlier.<sup>115</sup>

Fulgentius stresses the exclusive teaching function of the Catholic Church in its Trinitarian doctrine and contrasts it with the Arian one. In his first letter to Ferrandus, he states that Proverbs 1:8 (“Hear, my child, your father’s instructions and do not reject your mother’s teaching”) helps to remind an individual to “never reject the general canons of holy Mother the Church, i.e., those which the most harmonious assent of all the bishops confirms.”<sup>116</sup> For the first time, Mother Church is associated with the canons formed in the ecumenical councils. Whereas assent to the *regula fidei* previously functioned as one of the marks of the true church, the decrees of the ecumenical councils, especially

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<sup>113</sup> *de remiss. pecc.* 1.6.2-3 (CCSL 91A:653.150-52, 174-75): “Ecclesiae catholicae gremio derelicto, ad haereses uel schismata deprauati cordis caecitate transire... Scit etiam quod non alibi quam in solo gremio catholicae matris dimitti possint peccata conuersis” (Trans. author).

<sup>114</sup> *de remiss. pecc.* 1.21.1.

<sup>115</sup> *Sancta* = *Fab. frag.* 34, *ep.* 12.10.22; *de praedest.* 2.39, *ad Pet.* 28.71; *Catholica* = *ep.* 3.9, *de praedest.* 2.39, *ps. Abe.* 19, *de remiss. pecc.* 1.6.3.

<sup>116</sup> *ep.* 12.22 (CCSL 91:375.452-54): “sanctae matris ecclesiae generalia constituta, id est ea quae concordissima cunctorum firmat assensio pontificum, nullatenus repellamus” (Trans. Eno, *Fulgentius: Selected Works*, 491).



Nicaea, developed as the standard of orthodoxy among North African Catholics.<sup>117</sup> Given Fulgentius's polemical concern with the Arians, whose Trinitarian position was anathematized in prior councils, his association of the conciliar canons with the nutritive function of Mother Church makes sense.<sup>118</sup> In his second letter to Ferrandus, commenting on the opposing Trinitarian doctrines of Arianism and Sabellianism, he asserts, "But the inseparable Trinity conquered both; the unconfused unity trampled both; each one alienated from the womb of the most pious mother and buried himself and his accomplices in the pit of impiety."<sup>119</sup> According to Fulgentius, any teaching not in conformity with the Catholic Church is necessarily alienated from the mother and thereby an impious belief to be avoided.<sup>120</sup>

Unlike Quodvultdeus, Fulgentius does not deviate from Augustine's typological understanding of the church. In *On the Forgiveness of Sins*, he repeats the Augustinian reading of Rachel as a scriptural type for *mater ecclesia* to explain the reception of

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<sup>117</sup> See Robert Eno, "Doctrinal Authority in the African Ecclesiology of the Sixth Century: Ferrandus and Facundus," *REAUG* 22, nos. 1-2 (1976): 95-113. North Africa, since Tertullian, had always held a close relationship with Rome and often looked toward Rome and the conciliar method to resolve problems. At the same time, however, North African church leaders also sought to maintain their ecclesial autonomy, as was the case with Cyprian and Stephen. While their relationship with Rome continued to strengthen, North Africans eventually regarded the decrees of the ecumenical councils as having more authority than the bishop of Rome, as was the case with Apiarius; see Merdinger, *Rome and the African Church*, 206.

<sup>118</sup> Elsewhere Fulgentius does attribute the nourishment of Mother Church to the *regula fidei*, suggesting ecumenical canons have not yet fully replaced it as the standard of orthodoxy or that the two were seen as the same thing (*de dispen. Dom.* 1.11).

<sup>119</sup> *ep.* 14.11 (CCSL 91:398.391-95): "Sed utrumque trinitas inseparabilis uicit, utrumque unitas inconfusa contriuit, uterque a uulua ecclesiae matris alienatus abscessit, uterque a uentre piissimae genitricis errauit, et semetipsum suos que complices barathro impietatis immersit" (Trans. Eno, *Fulgentius: Selected Works*, 512).

<sup>120</sup> To explain why anyone would stray from the teaching of mother Church, Fulgentius relies on Augustine's doctrine of grace and claims he/she was never given the grace of perseverance in the first place (*ad Pet.* 28.71; cf. *de praedest.* 2.39).

individuals baptized in another ecclesial womb.<sup>121</sup> Following the cessation of baptizing converts from other ecclesial communities, the Cyprianic interpretation of the Sarah and Hagar account, with its emphasis on spiritual birth-rite, was no longer an apt reading. Although rebirth was still considered necessary for salvation, the location/mother of that birth was not a necessary condition for salvation, only an eventual association with the true church/mother was required. Just as Augustine formulated this exegetical understanding against the Donatists in his attempt to maintain the exclusivity of the Catholic Church while supporting the inclusion of those baptized in other communities, Fulgentius continues to employ this reading against the Arians whom he was trying to convert.

### **Conclusion**

The notion of *mater ecclesia* remained a central feature of North African ecclesiology throughout the fifth and sixth centuries. Both Quodvultdeus and Fulgentius utilized and tailored the concept of *mater ecclesia* to their pastoral and polemical concerns. Although Fulgentius was more dependent on Augustine in an almost perfunctory fashion, his reliance on the maternal metaphor attests to its continued popularity. Quodvultdeus augmented as well as deviated from Augustine to fit his own ecclesiological needs. Quodvultdeus filtered *mater ecclesia* through his apocalyptic worldview, which was heightened by the Vandal invasion, and portrayed *mater ecclesia* as a cosmic figure through his exegesis of Revelation 12, continuing the trend begun by Cyprian of abstracting the church from the local community. Moreover, due to his pastoral preoccupation of maintaining his church in the face of religious and cultural

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<sup>121</sup> *de remiss. pecc.* 1.23.2.

persecution, Quodvultdeus sometimes incorporated a more Cyprianic portrayal of *mater ecclesia* than did Augustine, emphasizing the purity of the church as a measure to demarcate true membership in the church. However, despite some of the nuanced differences between their uses of *mater ecclesia*, both Quodvultdeus and Fulgentius maintained the traditional exclusionary connotation of the metaphor. The works of Quodvultdeus and Fulgentius, along with the labial-shaped baptismal font at Sbeitla, suggest that Mother Church continued to be a central ecclesiological figure in North Africa, and given the continued use and development, most likely remained as much until Islam displaced Christianity as the established religion of North Africa in the seventh century.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> The arrival of Islam can no longer be viewed as an eradication of Christianity in North Africa, but it did radically alter Christianity's established position. For a strong historiographical analysis and nuanced view concerning the emergence of Islam in North Africa, see Mark A. Handley, "Disputing the End of African Christianity," in *Vandals, Romans, and Berbers*, 291-310 (esp. 302-9).

## CHAPTER VI

### GENERAL CONCLUSION

#### **The Role of *Mater Ecclesia* in North African Ecclesiology**

This dissertation has illustrated the centrality of the metaphor, *mater ecclesia*, in North African ecclesiology. From the arrival of Christianity in North Africa in the early second century until its displacement by Islam in the mid-seventh century, *mater ecclesia* functioned as one of its more prominent images for expressing the corporate nature and role of the church. Every major North African thinker, from Tertullian to Fulgentius, developed the maternal metaphor in accordance with his own respective ecclesiology. Not only was *mater ecclesia* heavily employed in pastoral and polemical writings, where the notion of “church” was primarily advanced and disseminated, but it was also displayed visually in the church itself, in funerary mosaics and baptismal fonts. Thus, the image of *mater ecclesia* was not simply another theological convention in North Africa but an ingrained ecclesial sensibility that was continuously experienced throughout a Christian’s life. Although other western regions appealed to this image, the proverbial home of *mater ecclesia* was clearly North Africa.

This study has demonstrated that *mater ecclesia*, as a metaphor expressing ecclesiology, naturally evolved along with the concept of the church in North Africa. In its earliest use, *mater ecclesia* was associated with the local Christian community and its adherence to an established disciplinary and confessional standard. Tertullian, who connected the unity of the church with a consensus of faith (*regula fidei*) and action

(*disciplina*), exhibited this tendency and asserted that heretics and adulterers were without a mother/church. Cyprian held a similar notion early in his career and presented *mater ecclesia* as a reflection of the local community's adherence to discipline. However, when Cyprian identified the church with the college of bishops to stymie the efforts of growing factions within his church, he began to personify *mater ecclesia* as a reality distinct from the local community. Likewise, Augustine reshaped the identity of the church, especially during his polemic with the Donatists, shifting its boundaries from a temporally-identifiable college of bishops to an eschatologically-realized communion of saints. Augustine's portrayal of *mater ecclesia*, as a result, took on a more personified character, evident in his *prosopopoeia* of Mother Church in *Psalm against the Donatists*, and became connected with the heavenly Jerusalem.

Scriptural exegesis associated with *mater ecclesia* became more speculative over time, paralleling the developments in ecclesiology. Although Tertullian never directly correlated his use of *mater ecclesia* with a particular biblical passage, Cyprian frequently read "historical" mothers (Sarah, Rachel, Hannah, and the mother of 2 Maccabees) as typological figures for the church. Due to his debate with the Manicheans, Augustine asserted that every scriptural passage pointed to Christ and his church, and accordingly, he was the most creatively expressive in tying the metaphor of *mater ecclesia* to scriptural precedents. Not only did he utilize the maternal images in the Pauline epistles, especially Galatians 4:25-6 and 1 Corinthians 3:2, but he also turned to Genesis and the Psalms for exegetical support. Finally, Quodvultdeus, due to his apocalyptic sensibility driven by the Vandal incursions, built upon preceding portrayals and associated *mater ecclesia* with the pregnant mother of Revelation 12.

This analysis of the patristic use of *mater ecclesia* in North Africa challenges prior scholarship in two ways. First, the image of *mater ecclesia* did not remain static, but each writer continued to develop it in light of their ecclesiological demands. In contrast to those of Plumpe and Delahaye, which locate the fullest expression of *mater ecclesia* in the writings of Tertullian or Cyprian, this study demonstrates the adaptability of the metaphor and its continual evolution in North African ecclesiology.<sup>1</sup> Second, North African writers were more speculative than has been previously assumed; Plumpe and Delahaye's categories are overly simplistic and create a false dichotomy between western and eastern patristic uses of the metaphor. Just as Ledegang demonstrates the existence of a terrestrial understanding of *mater ecclesia* in Origen's writings, this study reveals that there was a heavenly understanding of *mater ecclesia* among North African thinkers as well, one that met its fullest expression under Augustine.<sup>2</sup> While it is not apparent, as Balthasar argues, that patristic speculation on a pure, spotless church led to an unreflective hypostasizing of *mater ecclesia*, North Africans did increasingly personify and elaborate on the character of the church with each succeeding generation.<sup>3</sup>

The existence of a consistent thread implicit in the North African use of *mater ecclesia* was demonstrated as well. Unlike past scholarship, however, this consistency is not located in the image itself, or its referent, but rather in the way in which the metaphor was employed and the conditions under which it developed. As the metaphor of *mater ecclesia* was born out of and was expressed most frequently in the context of ecclesial crises, this study argues that the image of *mater ecclesia* possessed a connotation of

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<sup>1</sup> Plumpe, *Mater Ecclesia*, 87 and Delahaye, *Ecclesia Mater*, 115-21.

<sup>2</sup> Ledegang, *Mysterium Ecclesiae*, 203-17.

<sup>3</sup> Balthasar, *Office of Peter*, 195-242, esp. 206-9.

exclusive association, since the metaphor was predominantly used to define the boundaries of the church and its membership. This is best exemplified in Cyprian's dictum, "One cannot have God for a Father who does not have the church for a mother."<sup>4</sup> No matter what or who were identified as constitutive of the true church, *mater ecclesia* stood as one of the primary symbols delineating this; she was associated with the standards of the *regula fidei*, the collective decisions of the college of bishops, and the decrees of the ecumenical councils.

Even Augustine, who significantly broadened the nature of the church by constructing a temporally *permixta ecclesia* and by separating the existence and efficacy of sacramental action, still possessed an exclusive ecclesiology wherein salvation was determined by one's relationship to the true *mater ecclesia*, which Augustine identified as the communion of saints.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, nutritive and parturient elements are common to *mater ecclesia*, as Tromp and Jensen demonstrate. However, they are often used to demonstrate the necessity of belonging to the one true church vis-à-vis those communities or activities perceived as devoid of the spiritual gifts exclusively possessed by *mater ecclesia*. *Mater ecclesia* was a symbol for group membership and represented a tangibly discernible boundary, separating the saved from the damned. Thus, the meaning and function of the appellation *mater ecclesia*, as developed in North African ecclesiology, was not conciliatory and inclusive, but rather polemical and exclusive.

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<sup>4</sup> *unit.* 6 (CCSL 3:253.149-50): "Habere iam non potest Deum patrem qui ecclesiam non habet matrem" (Trans. author).

<sup>5</sup> Likewise, Augustine relies on Galatians 4:21ff. All North Africans utilizing the image of *mater ecclesia* either allude or directly cite this passage in conjunction with the metaphor. Even though Augustine had to reinterpret the passage to argue for the validity of baptisms outside of the Catholic Church, he still maintains the story of Sarah and Hagar (as interpreted by Paul) to represent typologically those who belonged to the true church, through their association with the rightful mother, and those who are disinherited through their association with a false one.

### **Postscript: Where is Mother Church Today?**

The use of Mother Church as a means for characterizing the nature and function of the church continued throughout the medieval and modern eras, especially among Roman Catholics.<sup>6</sup> Just as in the patristic period, the image of *mater ecclesia* proved to be adaptable with the various ecclesiological changes that developed. This is best exemplified with the use of Mother Church in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Catholicism. As the Catholic Church became retrenched against escalating hostility from secular authorities, it advanced a more centralized ecclesiology, one that consolidated the identity and authority of the church exclusively in the office of the papacy.<sup>7</sup> The image of Mother Church accordingly became associated with the teaching office of the Catholic Church and was often referred to as *magistra mater ecclesia*.<sup>8</sup> Benedict XV's Apostolic Constitution, *Providentissima Mater* (1917), for example, discusses the church's motherhood solely in terms of the legal authority exercised by pontiffs and councils.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that the metaphor of *mater ecclesia* is exclusively used by Roman Catholics or that they have a privileged claim to the image. For a brief survey of Luther and Calvin's use, see George H. Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 103-33 and Carl E. Braaten, *Mother Church: Ecclesiology and Ecumenism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 2-7. However, the term is less common in modern Protestantism.

<sup>7</sup> This characterization of Catholic retrenchment and reaction during the modern era comes from Nicholas Atkin's and Frank Tallett's *Priests, Prelates and People: A History of European Catholicism since 1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Yves Congar, "The *Ecclesia* or Christian Community as a Whole Celebrates the Liturgy," in *At the Heart of Christian Worship: Liturgical Essays of Yves Congar*, trans. and ed. by Paul Philibert (Collegetown, MN: Pueblo, 2010), 42.

<sup>9</sup> Other notable examples manifesting a legalistic and magisterial understanding of *mater ecclesia* include Pius XII's Apostolic Constitution, *Provida Mater Ecclesia* (2 February 1947) and the professions made by Pius IX in the second session of the First Vatican Council (6 January 1870). More recently, John Paul II echoed this understanding of *mater ecclesia* in his address to the German bishops on their "ad limina" visit (20 November 1999). Here, he reminds the bishops that the "*Mater* is also *Magistra*" and locates the source of its teaching function solely within the college of bishops and the papacy.



Again, the metaphor of Mother Church was a central image at the inauguration of Vatican II (11 October 1962), a watershed moment in Catholic ecclesiology.<sup>10</sup> In his speech, “*Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*” (“Mother Church Rejoices”), John XXIII reaffirmed his earlier call to *aggiornamento* (i.e., bringing the church up to date) and disclosed his methodological vision for the council through an invocation to Mother Church. He began with the following declaration:

Mother Church rejoices that, by the singular gift of Divine Providence, the longed-for day has finally dawned when -- under the auspices of the virgin Mother of God, whose maternal dignity is commemorated on this feast -- the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council is being solemnly opened here beside St. Peter's tomb.<sup>11</sup>

He found the maternal metaphor particularly useful in expressing the Catholic Church's role in the world and its duty toward other Christian communities:

The Catholic Church, raising the torch of religious truth by means of this Ecumenical Council, desires to show herself to be the loving mother of all, benign, patient, full of mercy and goodness toward the brethren who are separated from her.<sup>12</sup>

Consonant with his 1961 encyclical, *Mater et Magistra*, John XXIII promoted an image of the Catholic Church as a kindly, nutritive mother whose function is to be the temporal locus of truth and Christian charity. His use of *mater ecclesia* was particularly apt, given the metaphor's historically prevalent association with explicating the nature of the church and the council's focus on ecclesial renewal.

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<sup>10</sup> Despite its historical impact, Vatican II's opening ceremony was not enthusiastically received by many of the council participants. For an overview of the opening ceremony and its reception, see Andrea Riccardi, “The Tumultuous Opening Days of the Council,” in *History of Vatican II*, Vol. 2, ed. by Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997): 1-26.

<sup>11</sup> *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. W. A. Abbott and trans. Joseph Gallagher (New York: Guild Press, 1966), 710.

<sup>12</sup> *The Documents of Vatican II*, 716. Here, for patristic testimony, John XXIII explicitly cites Cyprian's *On the Unity* 5 (albeit one of the more benign passages absent of exclusionary language).

Oddly enough, despite its prominence at the opening of Vatican II, Catholic scholars have noted since then an appreciable decline of Mother Church in Catholic ecclesial discourse. Hans Urs von Balthasar, for instance, asks,

Is the image of “our Mother the Church” (that has become alien to us, and that we prefer to replace with the more popular expression “People of God”) anything more than an analogy that was once appropriate, on the basis of prevailing cultural conditions, and that is no longer appropriate since it no longer corresponds to our changed way of thinking and feeling?<sup>13</sup>

Iterating an unease similar to Balthasar’s regarding the recent disuse of the image of Mother Church, Henri de Lubac in *Motherhood of the Church* (1971) states, “The motherhood of the Church no longer means anything to our systems—but we...need to return to our mother.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the image of *mater ecclesia* has rarely appeared in recent ecclesiological and magisterial writings. Avery Dulles, for example, in his classic work on ecclesiology, *Models of the Church*, does not include Mother Church as one of the historical models of the church.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, John Paul II and Benedict XVI’s use of Mother Church is negligible when compared to the magisterial writings of their predecessors.

While both Balthasar and Lubac correctly identify this trend and offer a reason for its occurrence, neither are ultimately convincing. Balthasar attributes the reduced use of

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<sup>13</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Office of Peter and the Structure of the Church*, trans. Andrée Emery (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 199.

<sup>14</sup> Lubac, *Motherhood of the Church*, 164. See also Donald Calloway, “*Mater Ecclesia*: An Ecclesiology for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (November, 2001): 1-6. [http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2007/dcolloway\\_materecc\\_ljun07.asp](http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2007/dcolloway_materecc_ljun07.asp).

<sup>15</sup> Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, expanded ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2002). The metaphor is also absent in Jean Daniélou’s works, most notably in *Prayer: The Mission of the Church*, trans. David Louis Schindler, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996) and *Why the Church?*, trans. Maurice F. de Lange (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1975). Moreover, Congar rarely employs *mater ecclesia* in his ecclesiological works, despite his analysis of the metaphor’s “obliteration” in “*The Ecclesia*,” 30-48.

Mother Church to a growing trend in Catholic ecclesiology where the church is treated as a “purely sociological entity.”<sup>16</sup> For Balthasar, this signals a de-feminization of the church due to an overemphasis on Peter and the magisterial office he symbolizes. Lubac perceives the problem differently and argues that it stems from the development of a depersonalized and overly abstracted ecclesiology.<sup>17</sup> What is most problematic with their explanations, however, is the fact that the metaphor of Mother Church more commonly appeared in writings prior to Vatican II, in a period that embodied the very ecclesiological tendencies that they identify as detrimental to the metaphor’s expression.

There are three possible reasons for the recent disuse of Mother Church in Catholic ecclesial discourse. First, the framers of *Lumen Gentium*, Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, preferred to advance biblical images for elucidating the mystery of the church.<sup>18</sup> In his opening speech at the second session of the council (29 September 1963), Paul VI states,

There can be no doubt whatever of the Church’s desire and need and duty to give a more thorough definition of herself. We are all familiar with the magnificent images with which Holy Scripture describes the nature of the Church: the building raised up by Christ, the house of God, the temple and

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<sup>16</sup> Balthasar argues that the church has always possessed masculine (office) and feminine (motherhood) attributes, which were historically realized in the persons of Peter and Mary and fully articulated in *Lumen Gentium*; for Balthasar, both traits need to be emphasized equally in order to avoid the formation of a distorted ecclesiology (*Office of Peter*, 195ff).

<sup>17</sup> Lubac sees *mater ecclesia* as an effective symbol that emphasizes the personal communion inherent in the church and combats an overly abstracted and objectified ecclesiology (*Motherhood of the Church*, 164ff). For a similar study dealing with the scriptural antecedents of *mater ecclesia*, see Gilberte Baril, *The Feminine Face of the People of God: Biblical Symbols of the Church as Bride and Mother*, trans. Florestine Audette (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992). Influenced by *ressourcement* theology, especially Yves Congar, Baril’s goal, much like Balthasar’s, is to affirm the femininity of the church vis-à-vis the masculinity of its apostolic ministry.

<sup>18</sup> See Gustave Weigel, “How is the Council Going?,” *America* 109 (1963): 730-2. Weigel, a *peritus* at Vatican II, says concerning the debates over *De Ecclesia* that it was decided to focus on biblical imagery as opposed to an Aristotelian definition of the church.

tabernacle of God, his people, his flock, his vine, his field, his city, the pillar of truth, and finally, the bride of Christ, his Mystical Body.<sup>19</sup>

Mother Church is appropriately missing from this list of biblically-based ecclesial images, since it arose out of the preached tradition of the church rather than from an explicit scriptural antecedent. Indeed, biblical images, such as “People of God” and “servant,” are prominently utilized in *Lumen Gentium*, whereas Mother Church plays a fairly insignificant role.<sup>20</sup>

Second, when the documents of Vatican II do refer to the image of ecclesial motherhood, it is principally in regard to Mary’s relationship with the church. *Lumen Gentium* emphasizes Mary as the eminent type of the church and the paradigmatic model for all Christians to emulate.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, an association between Mary and the church dates as far back as Augustine and Ambrose, who paralleled the motherly attributes of both Mary and *mater ecclesia*. Nevertheless, both early church thinkers maintained a distinction between the two figures. By the Middle Ages, however, various thinkers, such as Berengaudus and Aelred of Rievaulx, began to merge the two figures and created a notion of *Maria mater ecclesiae*. Although the framers of *Lumen Gentium* avoided using this controversial title, they did settle on referring to Mary as “our mother,” and thus effectively subordinated the maternal role of the church under that of Mary.<sup>22</sup> This,

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<sup>19</sup> “The Task,” in *Council Speeches of Vatican II*, ed. Hans Kung, Yves Congar and Daniel O’Hanlon (Glen Rock, NJ: Paulist, 1964), 25.

<sup>20</sup> Mother Church was used only four times in the document: concerning catechumens (14-5) and concerning holiness (6, 41-2).

<sup>21</sup> *LG* 52-69, esp. 60-5.

<sup>22</sup> In more recent times, Mary has been referred to as the Mother of the church (*Maria mater ecclesiae*); see Hugo Rahner *Our Lady and the Church*, trans. Sebastian Bullough (Bethesda, MD: Zaccheus Press, 2004), whose historical analysis influenced Paul VI’s concluding speech at the third session of Vatican II (21 November 1964) and John Paul II’s *Redemptoris Mater* (1987). For good analyses surrounding these declarations, see Tavard, *The Thousand Faces of the Virgin Mary*, 202 -17; Otto Semmelroth, “The Role of

coupled with the absence of a clear distinction between Mother Mary and Mother Church, could account for the diminished expression of the latter.

Third, and what I contend to be the most influential factor affecting the use of *mater ecclesia*, Vatican II advanced what Avery Dulles characterizes as a “paradigm shift” in Catholic ecclesiology.<sup>23</sup> The framers of *Lumen Gentium* not only avoided promoting a single ecclesiology but also broadened the notion of the church, especially in regard to other denominations and religions.<sup>24</sup> Rather than reaffirm Robert Bellarmine’s definition of the church, which had been dominant in Catholic ecclesiology for over three hundred years, they refrained from identifying the church solely in terms of a visibly tangible institutional church and advocated a collegial and ecumenical model, which was more loosely defined at least in terms of soteriology.<sup>25</sup> As John W. O’Malley concludes,

Vatican II highlighted the importance of baptism as the foundation of the Christian life and as the entrance into the body of the church. It thereby validated a less restrictive understanding of membership in the Catholic Church, for the church to some degree includes all the baptized. At the

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the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church,” trans. by Richard Strachan. In *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, edited by Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967): 285-296; and Alberto Melloni, “The Beginning of the Second Period: The Great Debate on the Church,” in *History of Vatican II*, Vol. 3, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000): 95-8.

<sup>23</sup> Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 7-25. Likewise, John W. O’Malley describes to it as a stylistic change, in *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2008), 1-14. Karl Rahner goes so far as to see Vatican II as the watershed event beginning a “third epoch” in Christian history, in “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II,” *TS* 40 (1979): 716-27.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph A. Komonchak, “The Significance of Vatican II for Ecclesiology,” in *The Gift of the Church: A Textbook on Ecclesiology in Honor of Patrick Granfield*, O. S. B., ed. Peter C. Phan (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 69-92.

<sup>25</sup> Bellarmine defines the church as “a community of persons united by the profession of the same faith and joined in the communion of the same sacraments under the governance of legitimate pastors and especially of the one vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman pontiff” (*de controversiis* 2.3). For a good overview of Catholic ecclesiology in the modern era, see Michael J. Himes, “The Development of Ecclesiology: Modernity to the Twentieth Century,” in *The Gift of the Church: A Textbook on Ecclesiology in Honor of Patrick Granfield*, O. S. B., ed. Peter C. Phan (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 45-68.

same time the council took pains not to exclude from salvation even the unbaptized.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, *Lumen Gentium* stresses the interrelationship among all people (LG 13) and the possibility for salvation outside of the physical Catholic Church:

Nor will Divine Providence deny the assistance necessary for salvation to those who, without any fault of theirs, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, and who, not without grace, strive to live a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is considered by the church to be a preparation for the Gospel.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, Vatican II eschewed a Cyprianic ecclesiology in which an earthly/temporal church functions as the sole mediator of salvation. In doing so, it broke with a tangibly discernible dichotomy focused on those who are inside the church and saved, versus those who are outside the church and damned, a model that had dominated Catholic ecclesiology for over nineteen hundred years.

Given Mother Church's historical connotation of exclusivity and its polemical function for delineating group membership with regard to salvific status, Vatican II's paradigmatic shift in ecclesiology poses a potential impediment for its continued use in theological discourse. Concerning the use of imagery for explicating religious experience, Avery Dulles states,

Religious imagery is both functional and cognitive. In order to win acceptance, the images must resonate with the experience of the faithful. If they do so resonate, this is proof that there is some isomorphism between what the image depicts and the spiritual reality with which the faithful are in existential contact.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, 295.

<sup>27</sup> LG 16. "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: *Lumen Gentium*," in *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996), 22. It should be noted that this sentiment did not originate with Vatican II as it can be seen in Pius XII's encyclical, *Mystici Corporis Christi* (1943).

<sup>28</sup> Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 13. Likewise, Minear, whom Dulles quotes, also states, "Its self-understanding, its inner cohesion, its *esprit de corps*, derive from a dominant image of itself, even though

Religious imagery, because it is bound to experience, fluctuates over time concomitantly with changes in theological understanding and expression, and while some images are maintained, others fall into disuse. This is especially the case when major developments of theological paradigms take place. According to Dulles, “Each paradigm brings with it its own favorite set of images, its own rhetoric, its own values, certitudes, commitments, and priorities.”<sup>29</sup> The ecclesiological shift in Vatican II, and its emphasis on the church as “People of God,” may be restricting the isomorphic relationship between Mother Church and the present ecclesial experience in Catholicism. In other words, the maternal metaphor, at least in its historical understanding, may not work well with the ecclesiology advanced by Vatican II.

This potential disconnect between the metaphor of Mother Church and a post-Vatican II ecclesiology is illuminated by its continued use among traditionalist Catholic societies. Traditionalist groups, such as the sedevacantists and the Society of St. Pius X, fundamentally oppose the theological and disciplinary changes following Vatican II, especially those regarding ecumenism and religious liberty. They frequently appeal to the image of Mother Church in their polemical writings against the larger Catholic body.<sup>30</sup>

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that image remains inarticulately imbedded in subconscious strata. If an unauthentic image dominates its consciousness, there will first be subtle signs of malaise, followed by more overt tokens of communal deterioration. If an authentic image is recognized at the verbal level but denied in practice, there will also follow sure disintegration of the ligaments of corporate life” (*Images of the Church in the New Testament*, 24).

<sup>29</sup> Dulles, *Models of the Church*, 23.

<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, Marcel Lefebvre, *They Have Uncrowned Him: From Liberation to Apostasy, the Conciliar Tragedy* (Kansas City, MO: Angelus Press, 1988) and *I Accuse the Council* (Kansas City, MO: Angelus Press, 1982); Society of Saint Pius X, *The Problem of the Liturgical Reform* (Kansas City, MO: Angelus Press, 2001); Peter Dimond, *Outside the Catholic Church There is Absolutely No Salvation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Fillmore, NY: Most Holy Family Monastery, 2006) and “The Anti-popes of the Second Vatican Council vs. the Roman Catholic Church,” *A Voice Crying in the Wilderness* 4 (January 1, 1990).

The self-proclaimed Benedictine monk, Peter Dimond, for instance, repeatedly employs the metaphor of Mother Church to argue that there is no salvation for anyone who disregards the dogmatic teachings of the Catholic Church. In particular, he frequently cites the statement from Vatican I's Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith (24 April 1870) concerning the perpetual retention of all Catholic dogmas:

Hence, too, that meaning of the sacred dogmas is ever to be maintained which has once been declared by holy mother church, and there must never be any abandonment of this sense under the pretext or in the name of a more profound understanding.<sup>31</sup>

Dimond, as well as the other traditionalists, understands the image of Mother Church to express a pre-Vatican II notion of the church in which Mother Church represents the exclusive teaching authority of the Magisterium (*magistra mater ecclesia*).<sup>32</sup> For them, anyone who grants truth outside of the Catholic Church or advocates non-Catholic ideologies is heretical and should be avoided by the faithful as a matter of salvific necessity. Thus, much like the Donatists, the traditionalists perceive themselves as an exclusively pure community (in thought rather than practice) and utilize the maternal metaphor to define themselves over against what they see to be heresies propagated by the Second Vatican Council.

Having demonstrated the root cause for its decline, the more theologically pertinent issue concerns whether or not the use of Mother Church can be revived in what

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<sup>31</sup> I am using the translation found in Norman P. Tanner (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Vol. 2 Trent to Vatican II* (Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 809. Dimond uses the phrase "Holy Mother Church" over twenty times, either himself or by citing someone else who does: 13, 14, 238, 239, 240, 308; 13, 25, 104, 131, 239 (Pius IX); 16, 252 (Leo XII); 98, 318-319 (Pius IV, Trent); 144 (Innocent II); 161 (Pius XII).

<sup>32</sup> Richard P. McBrien appropriately claims that there was a clear line of distinction in pre-Vatican II ecclesiology between the *ecclesia docens* and the *ecclesia discens*, which Vatican II then blurs; *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 168. Traditionalists clearly maintain this distinction.



Karl Rahner calls the “Third Epoch” of Christian history. In other words, can the image of Mother Church function meaningfully in a post-Vatican II context where the church is more broadly and less visibly defined? Given the historical prevalence of Mother Church as a dominant image for ecclesial expression, it is hard to imagine that the metaphor will completely disappear from ecclesiological discourse or require a dismissal of Vatican II ecclesiology to retrieve it. Aside from providing an image that is rooted in the remote past, which is in itself inherently valuable in Roman Catholicism, Mother Church, as Lubac points out, expresses the interpersonal nature of the church that cannot be captured with other images. Moreover, as Balthasar notes, the metaphor of Mother Church provides a much-needed image of femininity in Roman Catholicism, which is all too often eclipsed by masculine-centered practices and images. To be sure, a historically meaningful retrieval of Mother Church will require some degree of adaptation in a post-Vatican II context to avoid the exclusive and polemical connotation associated with it. Perhaps the only way to maintain the maternal metaphor in this context is to highlight the nurturing and embracing attributes of Mother Church. This would allow the metaphor to retain a historically associated meaning (albeit a less dominant one), while still capturing the inclusive ecclesiology advanced at Vatican II.

## APPENDIX

Figure 1

*Ecclesia mater*, sepulchral mosaic found in Tabarka, Tunisia. Late 4<sup>th</sup> century. Bardo National Museum (Photo: Robin M. Jensen)



Figure 2  
Polylobed (vulval) baptismal font found in the Chapel of Jucundus. 4<sup>th</sup> century. Sbeitla, Tunisia (Photo: Robin M. Jensen)



Figure 3  
Polylobed (vulval) shaped baptismal font found in the baptistery of the Basilica of Vitalis. Late 5<sup>th</sup> or early 6<sup>th</sup> century. Sbeitla, Tunisia. (Photo: Robin M. Jensen)



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