

## The Lily and the Thorns : Augustine's Refutation of the Donatist Exegesis of the Song of Songs

'A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a garden locked, a fountain sealed' says the Song of Songs<sup>1</sup>. The Donatists used this verse to justify their refusal to open the gates to the Christians who had been traitors during the persecution of Diocletian (303-4). In doing so they relied on the authority of Cyprian who, before them, had applied the passage to the Church to underline its separation from the rest of the world and from the schismatic groups which appeared after the persecution of Decius (250). To refute such an exegesis, Augustine was led to examine closely the text of the Song of Songs<sup>2</sup>. He argues that the bride of the Song of Songs is not the Donatist Church. The Donatists, he says, are mistaken in their definition of the Church's spotlessness. The loved one is the Catholic Church which, despite its sinners, remains pure and virgin.

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1. Song of Songs 4, 12.

2. In her article «Le Cantique des Cantiques dans l'œuvre de saint Augustin» (*REAug.*, 1, 1955, pp. 225-237) A. M. La Bonnardière gives an exhaustive list of all the quotations from the Song of Songs found in Augustine's works. The Song of Songs appears nearly exclusively in baptismal or anti-donatist contexts. Augustine, in the *De civitate Dei* (XVII, 20), affirms that the Song of Songs is to be interpreted as the spiritual marriage of Christ and the Church but the bishop of Hippo never really develops the theme for its own sake. Instead he uses verses from Psalm 44. See E. LAMIRANDE, *Études sur l'Ecclésiologie de saint Augustin*, Ottawa, 1969, chap. 2 pp. 21-31. See also F. OHLY, *Hohelied-Studien*, Wiesbaden, 1958, p. 46 : 'Wenn ihm auch die Brautallegorie nicht fremd ist, so hat er sie doch weniger am Hohenlied, als an den Psalmen entwickelt'.

## I. - THE DONATISTS AND THE AFRICAN TRADITION

In opposing the 'exclusive' meaning given by Cyprian and the Donatists to Sg. 4,12, Augustine makes an attack on the rigorist tendencies which had characterized the African Church from its beginning<sup>3</sup>. Tertullian had already been deeply concerned by the discrepancy between the holiness of the Church and its members' lack of moral purity. In his Montanist work *De pudicitia*, he describes the Church as the 'spotless bride of Christ' (Eph. 5,27) and insists on the necessity for Christians to live in accordance with inherent ecclesiastical purity<sup>4</sup>. The faithful must keep unstained the purity bestowed by baptism and must live *sine ruga vetustatis, sine macula fornicationis, sine probro vilitatis*, that is as 'having been utterly purified'<sup>5</sup>. Repentance should take place before believing, before baptism and not after. Tertullian considers as unpardonable postbaptismal sins involving idolatry, fornication or murder. For lesser sins the Christian should be able to obtain pardon from the bishop or other ecclesiastical authority but the Church has no power to forgive the three capital sins ; only God can do so. By such affirmation Tertullian violently criticizes the penitential discipline of the African Church and especially an *edictum* of a *pontifex maximus*, whose name is not given, saying that he would remit the sins of adultery and fornication to those who had done penance<sup>6</sup>. Following the Montanist tradition, Tertullian opposes the organized Church or Church of the bishops, to the spiritual Church which he calls 'Church of the Spirit'<sup>7</sup>. Only the latter can forgive sins.

As his sympathies moved towards Montanism, Tertullian's conception of the Church became that of a pure spiritual group, an enclosed body of impeccable men and women waiting for the end of this world. Song of Songs 4, 12 is not

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3. W. Frend suggests that the African Church inherited its rigorism from the cult of Saturn which was the pre-Christian national cult. Saturn appeared like a tyrant to his faithful, imposing periods of abstinence and fasting. Sinners had to perform all kinds of sacrifice sometimes including that of their own children. See *The Donatist Church*, Oxford, 1985, pp. 78-86.

4. *De pudicitia* 18, CSEL 20, p. 260 (19-20), tr. A. ROBERTS and J. DONALDSON (ANCL vol. 18, Edinburgh, 1870) pp. 106-107 : «If moreover, even from a brother who walked idly (2 Thess. 3, 6) he [Paul] warns the Thessalonians to withdraw themselves, how much more withal from a fornicator ! For these are the deliberate judgements of Christ, loving His Church, who has delivered Himself up for her, that he may sanctify her (purifying her utterly by the laver of water) in the world, that He may present the Church to Himself glorious, not having stain or wrinkle – of course after the laver – but that she may be holy and without reproach (Eph. 5, 26-27) ; thereafter, to wit, being without wrinkle as a virgin, without stain (of fornication) as a spouse, without disgrace (of vileness), as having been utterly purified».

5. See footnote above.

6. *De pudicitia* 1, CSEL 20, p. 220 (3-7) : «Pontifex scilicet Maximus, quod est episcopus episcoporum, edicit : Ego et moechiae et fornicationis delicta paenitentia functis dimitto». J. Quasten thinks that Tertullian is referring here to Agrippus, bishop of Carthage (*Patrology*, vol. 2, Westminster, 1994, p. 313).

7. *De pudicitia* 21, CSEL 20, p. 271 (9-10). Cf. QUASTEN, *op. cit.*, p. 331.

found in the remaining writings of Tertullian but it is very likely that Cyprian, in his application of the verse to the Church as opposed to the secular world, had been influenced by the Tertullianic idea of the *Ecclesia* spotless bride of Christ<sup>8</sup>. Cyprian uses Sg. 4, 12 in connection with the problem of the validity of baptism given by heretics, especially the Novatianists. The latter, who themselves also inherited Tertullian's rigorism, refused concessions to those who had compromised during the Decian persecution. The Novatianists were excommunicated. Some gradually returned to the Catholic Church. The problem then was to decide the terms on which they should be received back and whether or not those who had received baptism from the hands of a Novatianist minister should undergo a second rite of baptism. Since in his view its effect derived from the name of Christ alone and independently of the orthodoxy of the ministrant, Stephen, bishop of Rome from 254 to 257, recognized Novatianist baptism as valid. He proposed welcoming those who had been baptized in heretical churches by a simple laying on of hands as a sign of reconciliation<sup>9</sup>. Cyprian and many African bishops refused to follow this policy and continued to demand a second rite of baptism in the case of converted schismatics. In his correspondence Cyprian quotes Sg. 4, 12 to justify such a position and writes :

...He [the Holy Spirit] says again : 'A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse ; a spring sealed up, a well of living water' (Sg. 4, 12 ; 4, 15). But if the spouse of Christ, which is the Church, is a garden enclosed, a thing that is closed up (*res clausa*) cannot lie open to strangers and profane persons. And if it is a fountain sealed, he who, being placed without (*foris*), has no access to the spring, can neither drink thence nor be sealed. And the well also of living water, if it is one and the same within (*intus*), he who is placed without (*foris*) cannot be quickened and sanctified from that water of which it is only granted to those who are within (*intus*) to make any use, or to drink<sup>10</sup>.

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8. According to the *Biblia Patristica* only two quotations from the Song of Songs are found in the whole work of Tertullian : Sg. 4, 8 is quoted in the *Adversus Marcionem* and Sg. 8, 6 in *Fragmenta varia*. See *Biblia Patristica: des origines à Clément d'Alexandrie et Tertullien*, Paris, 1975, p. 210. Cyprian knew and utilized the work of Tertullian in many of his writings. See R. F. EVANS, *One and holy: The Church in Latin Patristic Thought*, London, 1972, p. 38 : «It appears that Cyprian was an avid reader of Tertullian. Most of his non-epistolary writings deal with themes and problems in the writings of Tertullian and in their content betray dependence on that author».

9. See J. STEVENSON, *A New Eusebius*, London, 1987, p. 238f., n. 214, «The views of Stephen of Rome against rebaptism of heretics».

10. Letter LXIX, II, 1. Ed. BAYARD (*Saint Cyprien, correspondance*, Paris, 1925, vol. 2) p. 240, tr. A. ROBERTS and J. DONALDSON (ANF, vol. 5, Edinburgh, 1990), pp. 397-398 (Epistle LXXV, 2 – the numbering of the letters is different from that of the Bayard edition). See also letter LXXIV, XI, 2, ed. BAYARD, vol. 2, p. 288, tr. A. ROBERTS and J. DONALDSON p. 389 (letter LXXIII, 11) : «The sacrament [baptism] of which unity we see expressed also in the Canticles, in the person of Christ, who says : "A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse, a fountain sealed, a well of living water, a garden with the fruit of apples". But if His Church is a garden enclosed, and a fountain sealed, how can he who is not in the Church enter into the same garden, or drink from its fountain ?».

The Church is the 'garden enclosed' of the Song of Songs, a garden inaccessible to strangers and especially to heretics. Cyprian's ecclesiology is articulated by the stark dichotomy inside/out (*intus/foris*). Augustine rejects such a strict distinction by arguing that the reality is more complex and that some people who seem inside the garden are really outside it and vice versa.

II. - AUGUSTINE'S ANSWER TO THE DONATISTS : THE CHURCH 'GARDEN ENCLOSED' AND 'LILY AMONG THE THORNS'

Augustine argues against the Donatists' utilization of Cyprian's exegesis of Sg. 4, 12 to justify their refusal to admit to the Church those who had been traitors during the persecution of Diocletian. He insists that the verse must be applied to the Church only insofar as she is *in sanctis et iustis* and that it does not however exclude the sinners from the visible Church. The 'garden enclosed' of the Song of Songs contains 'lilies' as well as 'thorns' (Sg. 2, 2) :

'A garden enclosed is my sister, my spouse [...]'

I dare not understand this except of the holy and just, -not of the covetous, and defrauders, and robbers [...] of whom we yet both learn most fully from Cyprian's letters [...] that they had baptism in common with the just, in common with whom they certainly had not Christian charity. For I would like someone to tell me how they crept into 'the garden enclosed and the fountain sealed' of whom Cyprian bears witness that they renounced the world in word not in deed and that yet they were within the Church. For if they both are themselves there, and are themselves the bride of Christ, can she then be as she is described, 'without spot or wrinkle' (Eph. 5, 27) and is the fair dove (cf. Sg. 6, 8) defiled with such a portion of her members? Are these the thorns among which she is a lily (cf. Sg. 2,2), as it is said in the same song?<sup>11</sup>

Augustine refutes Cyprian by Cyprian. The institutional Church cannot be spoken of as a 'garden closed' to sinners since Cyprian himself, in his letters and his treatise *De lapsis*, recognizes that the Church naturally contains both the just and the unrighteous<sup>12</sup>. By underlining the contradictions in the writings of Cyprian, the bishop of Hippo questions the authority of Cyprian's exegesis of Sg. 4, 12. Augustine then proposes a different reading of the verse : the 'garden enclosed' of Sg 4, 12 includes both the 'lily' and the 'thorns' (Sg. 2, 2), i. e. those who 'live according to the Spirit' and those who are 'yet carnal' but are 'instant in working out their progress'. Among the latter there are some who 'as yet live wickedly or even lie in heresies or in the superstitions of the Gentiles' but, quoting 2 Timothy 2, 19 Augustine adds, 'the Lord knows those who are His'<sup>13</sup>. The bishop of Hippo underlines the primacy of God in separating the

11. AUGUSTINE, *De baptismo*, liber V, XXVII, 38, BA 29, p. 394, tr. (altered) by J. R. KING (NPNF vol. IV) p. 476f.

12. *De lapsis* 6, ed. BÉVENOT (Oxford, 1971), pp. 8-10. In this chapter Cyprian describes the corruption of members of the Church in the time of Callistus. See also Letter XI, ed. BAYARD, vol. 1, pp. 27-33.

13. *De baptismo*, liber V, XXVII, 38, BA 29, p. 396, tr. J. KING p. 477.

good from the bad. Only the 'ineffable foreknowledge of God' – *ineffabilis praescientia dei* – is able to distinguish between those who seem to be without the Church but are in reality within and those who seem to be within but are really without<sup>14</sup>. Augustine criticizes the Cyprianic stark dichotomy *intus / foris* adopted by the Donatists and he reproaches the latter for their attempt to override the divine judgement by themselves imposing the division between the just and the unrighteous. Such an attempt does not take into consideration the capability of man to reform himself. To the strict dichotomy inside/outside, Augustine opposes the notion of spiritual progress.

Although the 'garden enclosed' includes both the 'lily' and the 'thorns', the just and the sinners, only the former compose the garden. The just constitute the garden itself whereas the sinners do not participate in the structure of the garden but merely happen to be in it :

The number, therefore, of the just persons, 'who are the called according to His purpose' (Rm. 8, 28), of whom it is said 'The Lord knows them that are His' (2 Tim. 2, 19) is itself (*ipse est*) 'the garden enclosed, the fountain sealed, a well of living water, the orchard of pomegranates with pleasant fruits' (Sg. 4, 12-13). [...] Of all those, therefore, who, if I may so say, are inwardly and secretly within, is that 'enclosed garden' composed (*constat*) [...] <sup>15</sup>.

In place of the *intus / foris* opposition, Augustine prefers the *intus esse / constare* division. This becomes even clearer in book 7 of the *De baptismo*. The bishop of Hippo identifies the 'house of God' with the dove and the enclosed garden of the Song of Songs (Sg. 6, 8 and 4, 12) and writes :

...this house is composed of those who are good and faithful, and the holy servants of God dispersed throughout the world, and bound by the unity of the Spirit, whether they know each other personally or not. But we hold that others are said to be in the house (*esse in domo*) after such a sort, that they belong not to the structure of the house (*non pertineant ad compagem domus*), nor to the society of fruitful and peaceful justice, but only as the chaff is said to be among the corn<sup>16</sup>.

There is no doubt in Augustine's mind that the 'garden enclosed' is composed of the 'fixed number of the saints predestined before the foundation of the world', but this does not exclude from the garden the imperfect<sup>17</sup>. The garden contains a mixture of good and bad men. In chapter 14 of the *Epistula ad*

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14. *Ibid.*

15. *De baptismo*, liber V, XXVII, 38, BA 29, p. 394f. and 398, tr. J. KING p. 477.

16. *De baptismo*, liber VII, LI, 99, BA 29, p. 564, tr. J. KING (altered) p. 512.

17. *De baptismo*, liber V, XXVII, 38, BA 29, p. 394. H. Riedlinger (*Die Makellosigkeit der Kirche in den lateinischen Hoheliedkommentaren des Mittelalters*, Münster, p. 61f.) rightly underlines the ambiguity of Augustine's thought on the place of sinners in the Church. In the *De baptismo* there are many texts where sinners are automatically included in the Church and other passages where they seem to be excluded. In fact Augustine distinguishes two different levels of membership corresponding to the dichotomy *intus esse / constare*. Most passages become clear when read in the light of this bipartite division.

*Catholicos* Augustine gathers several scriptural passages as proof of the *permixio* of the Church. The first passage he quotes is Sg. 2, 2: 'As a lily among the thorns, so is my beloved among the maidens'. He brings together this verse, the parable of the weeds among the wheat (Mt. 13, 24-30) and that of the fisherman catching fish of every kind in his net (Mt. 13, 47-50)<sup>18</sup>.

Augustine is not the first Christian writer to underline the mixed character of the Church. We learn from the *De idololatria* that already in the time of Tertullian some people were arguing that the Church contained good men as well as bad ones. They referred to the latter as the snakes and the dogs of Noah's Ark<sup>19</sup>. In letter 54 Cyprian congratulates his correspondents on their return from the Novatianist schism and reaffirms the necessity of maintaining the unity of the Church and not withdrawing even though there seem to be 'tares' in it. The latter, Cyprian writes, are the vessels of earth (as opposed to the vessels of gold) described by Paul in his letter to Timothy<sup>20</sup>. Cyprian's conception of the Church is that of a society of the pure and holy, but because he was also concerned with safeguarding the unity of the Church by fighting rigorist schisms, he was led to recognize the inevitable presence of bad men in the Church. Tyconius, an intellectual who was expelled from the Donatist Church for his unorthodox opinions, developed the idea of a bipartite Church including both good and evil members. He used Sg. 1, 5 ('I am black but comely') as a scriptural testimony of the mixed character of the Church<sup>21</sup>. Augustine admired Tyconius whom he frequently refers to as an example for the Donatists<sup>22</sup>. The Augustinian reading of Sg. 2, 2 ('a lily among the thorns') follows Tyconius' tradition and constitutes a straightforward answer to the conception of the Church as a 'garden closed'.

### III. – THE BAPTISMAL FOUNTAIN: 'A FOUNTAIN SEALED' FLOWING OUTSIDE

#### THE GARDEN

The Donatists, following the authority of Cyprian, based themselves on the second half of Sg. 4, 12 ('a garden closed, a fountain sealed') in explaining the 'rebaptizing' of ex-members of the Catholic Church. Like Cyprian they considered baptism invalid when given outside their own Church (the only owner of the baptismal fountain) and by a minister whose integrity might have

18. *Epistula ad Catholicos* XIV, 35, BA 28, pp. 602-604.

19. TERTULLIAN, *De idololatria* 24, PL 1, col. 774. Quoted in W. FREND, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

20. 2 Tim. 2, 20 in letter LIV, III, 1, ed. BAYARD, vol. 2, p. 130, tr. A. ROBERTS and J. DONALDSON p. 327 (*ep. L*, 3). See also letter LV, XXV, 2, ed. BAYARD, vol. 2, p. 148, tr. p. 334 (*ep. LI*, 25).

21. Cf. W. FREND, *op. cit.*, p. 203 and note 4 p. 376-377 in BA 28 (*Contra epistulam Parmeniani*).

22. The *Contra epistulam Parmeniani* is a defence of Tyconius' positions on the nature of the Church. The latter had been violently attacked in a letter written around 378 by Parmenian, bishop of Carthage and successor of Donatus. See BA 28, note 10, p. 718-719.

been compromised during the persecutions. Where the second point is concerned, the Donatists quoted as scriptural witness Matthew 7, 17 : ‘...every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit’. Augustine opposes the idea that men baptized by good ministers automatically become good and that those who have received the sacrament from the hand of a bad priest become likewise bad. Jesus, the bishop of Hippo writes, would not have let his disciples baptize the crowd if he had thought that the sanctity of the sacrament depended on that of the ministrant. If this had been the case, Jesus would have baptized the crowd himself<sup>23</sup>.

With regard to the Donatist claim that the ‘fountain’ of baptism is unique and ‘sealed’ and therefore does not flow outside the Donatist Church, Augustine’s answer is the following :

...if that closed garden can contain the thorns of the devil, why cannot (*cur non et*) the fountain of Christ equally flow beyond the garden’s bounds ?<sup>24</sup>

Having previously established that the Church, according to the pronouncements of Cyprian himself, contains bad men as well as good, Augustine deduces by a kind of analogical reasoning that it must be possible for the sealed fountain to flow outside the garden. Augustine follows the tradition of Pope Stephen by acknowledging that the validity of baptism is independent of the ministrant’s orthodoxy. ‘The integrity of the sacrament is everywhere recognised’, the bishop of Hippo writes, ‘though it will not avail for the irrevocable remission of sins outside the unity of the Church’<sup>25</sup>. The baptism of heretics is valid insofar as it is the baptism of Christ (*baptismus Christi*) but no benefit can derive from it until the Christian has rejoined the Catholic Church<sup>26</sup>. Only the ‘groanings of that one dove’ (cf. Sg. 6, 9) i. e. ‘the prayers of the saints’ can remit sins<sup>27</sup>.

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23. *Epistula ad Catholicos XXI*, 59, BA 28, p. 671. On the spiritual power of the sacraments in Augustine see H. RIEDLINGER, *op. cit.*, p. 58. Augustine compares the sacraments to a light which remains immaculate even if it is passed on by impure men. (*Tr. in John V*, 15, PL 35, col 1422).

24. *De baptismo*, liber IV, VII, 10, BA 29, p. 258, tr. J. R. KING p. 451.

25. *De baptismo*, liber III, XVII, 22, BA 29, p. 214, tr. p. 443.

26. *De baptismo*, liber I, XII, 18, BA 29, p. 96, tr. p. 419 : «For, as in the case of him who had approached the sacrament in deceit there is no second baptism, but he is purged by faithful discipline and truthful confession, which he could not be without baptism, so that what was given before becomes then powerful to work his salvation, when the former deceit is done away by the truthful confession ; so also in the case of the man who, while an enemy to the peace and love of Christ, received in any heresy or schism the baptism of Christ, which the schismatics in question had not lost from among them, though by his sacrilege his sins were not remitted, yet, when he corrects his error, and comes over to the communion and unity of the Church, he ought not to be again baptized : because by his very reconciliation to the peace of the Church he receives this benefit, that the sacrament now begins in unity to be of avail for the remission of sins, which could not so avail him as received in schism».

27. *De baptismo*, liber III, XVII, 22, BA 29, p. 214, tr. p. 443.

Augustine's message is one of reconciliation. In his defence of the validity of baptism given by heretics, he opposes the Donatists' rule that Christians from the Catholic Church be rebaptized, but more importantly, shows that Donatist members will be welcomed back into the 'true' Church if they are willing to rejoin it. The weakness of Augustine's argument is that the Donatists considered their own Church as the 'one dove' and the true Catholic Church in Africa.

#### IV. – «UNITAS VIRGO EST»

In order to demonstrate that baptisms administered by heretics are valid, Augustine compares them to the baptisms of sinners in the Catholic Church<sup>28</sup>. Both the heretic and the sinner are baptized but cannot profit from it because they do not have the *caritas* which is the seal of the true Christian. It is thanks to this 'love', the bishop of Hippo explains, that Cyprian, although he had a different view concerning baptism, did not forsake the unity of the Church<sup>29</sup>. For Augustine *caritas* and the unity of the Church are inextricably linked. He who is not attached to the unity of the Church cannot possess love<sup>30</sup>. While the Donatists affirm that the bride of the Song of Songs is none other than the Donatist Church, Augustine applies verses of the poem to a personification of unity :

She herself says, you see, 'The king led me into his bedchamber' (Sg. 1,4). It is of such a bedchamber as that, that this is the secret. But all you here are not excluded from this sacred bedchamber ; so listen to what you are, and say with her, if you love with her- and you do love with her if you are in her ; all of you say, and still let her alone say, because it is the unity which says, 'Tell me, you whom my soul has loved'- they had, after all, only one soul and one heart toward God<sup>31</sup>.

The two themes, love and unity, become fused. The words of the Song of Songs can be pronounced by anyone who 'loves with' the Church and is in it. Augustine interprets the use in the singular of the term 'soul' in Sg. 1, 7 as proof of the necessity for ecclesiastical unity. The bishop of Hippo reproaches the Donatists for being 'beautifully attired' but not 'beautiful within'<sup>32</sup>. He brings

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28. It is with this comparison that Augustine ends the *De baptismo*. See BA 29, p. 574.

29. *De baptismo*, liber III, XIX, 26, BA 29, p. 222 : «plenitudo autem legis caritas, qua multum vigit Cyprianus, ut de baptismo aliud sentiens non autem deseret unitatem [...]».

30. *De baptismo*, liber III, XVI, 21, BA 29, p. 210 : «non autem habet dei caritatem, qui ecclesiae non diligit unitatem». See E. LAMIRANDE, *La situation ecclésiologique des Donatistes d'après saint Augustin*, Ottawa, 1972, pp. 40-41 : «Augustin présuppose comme évident qu'il n'y a, hors de l'unité visible de l'Église catholique, ni charité, ni union vitale au Christ, ni présence de l'Esprit-Saint. Unité et charité sont absolument liées».

31. Sermon 138, 7, PL 38, col. 766-7, tr. E. HILL (*The works of saint Augustine; sermons on the Old Testament*, vol. 4, New York, 1992) p. 389.

32. Sermon 138, 8, PL 38, col. 767, tr. E. HILL p. 390.

together Sg. 1, 8 ('Unless you know yourself ô most beautiful among women') and Ps. 44, 13 ('all the beauty of the king's daughter is within') to underline the superiority of inner beauty over external purity<sup>33</sup>. Augustine reproves the Donatists for having 'whitened themselves with the name of justice' at the expense of the Church's unity<sup>34</sup>. While for the Donatists the concept of 'self-knowledge' (Sg. 1, 8 : 'Unless you know yourself') was presumably associated with the need for moral introspection and purity, Augustine understands it as the necessity for the Christian to acknowledge the existence of only 'one flock' and 'one shepherd'. The virginity of the Church does not depend upon the purity of each individual member but only on strict fidelity to unity :

...so 'unless you know yourself' that you are one, that you are to be found among all nations, that you are chaste, that you must not be seduced by the perverse conversation of evil companions (cf. 1 Cor. 15, 33) ; 'unless you know yourself', that you were duly betrothed to me by that man, to be presented to Christ as a chaste virgin, and that you should duly present yourself to me, lest your understanding also should be led astray by evil conversations from chaste fidelity to me, in the way that the serpent seduced Eve by his cunning (2 Cor. 11, 2-3) ; [...] but 'if you do not know yourself, go out, you, in the tracks of the flocks, and graze your goats in the tabernacles of the shepherds' (Sg. 1, 8). Go out [...] in the tabernacles, not of the shepherd but of the shepherds ; not of unity, but of division, not established in the place where there is one flock and one shepherd (cf. Jn. 10, 16)<sup>35</sup>.

The preservation of the 'one flock' should be the first preoccupation of the Church. Augustine quotes from Paul and John. In doing so he follows the Cyprianic tradition. In the *De ecclesiae catholicae unitate* Cyprian uses John 10,16 to underline the necessity of avoiding schisms inside the Church<sup>36</sup>. By identifying the bridegroom's flock in the Song of Songs with that described by John as the 'one flock', Augustine opposes the Donatist exegesis of Sg. 1, 7 ('Tell me, [...] where you lie down in the noon day), a verse which they used as proof of the legitimacy of their particular Church. The Donatists interpreted 'noonday' as 'south' and concluded that Sg. 1, 7 designated Africa (and not Rome) as the geographical location of the Church. To counter the Donatists' claim that their Church holds a privileged place, the bishop of Hippo underlines the spread of christianity across the world. Augustine shows that Egypt, which is 'more to the south, under the midday sun, than Africa', could also be the bridegroom's flock as there is in that country 'a vast number of holy men and women' who 'turn their backs completely on the world'<sup>37</sup>. Augustine refers here to the growing number of nuns and monks living in Egypt as members of religious communities or as solitaries in the desert. This is the only passage, in

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33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

35. Sermon 138, 8, *PL* 38, col. 767-8, tr. E. HILL p. 390.

36. *De ecclesiae catholicae unitate* 8, ed. and tr. by M. BÉVENOT (Oxford, 1971), p. 71. The *De unitate* was well known to Augustine who used it as a source in many of his works. For a study of Augustine's references to Cyprian's treatise see O. PERLER, «Le De Unitate de Saint Cyprien interprété par saint Augustin», *Augustinus Magister*, Paris, 1954, pp. 835-858.

37. Sermon 138, 10, *PL* 38, col. 768-9, tr. E. HILL p. 391.

the whole of Augustine's work in which the Song of Songs is applied to monastic life. The bishop of Hippo usually does not use the Song of Songs in connection with Christian virginity<sup>38</sup>. He identifies the bride of Solomon's song with the virgin Mary only insofar as she is a symbol for the unity of the Church.

In Augustinian thought the virginity of Mary, i. e. the untouched unity of her body, is the corporeal illustration of what the Church should be :

This holy Song of Songs is a kind of wedding song for the bride and bridegroom ; it is a spiritual marriage, you see, in which we have to live with great chastity, because Christ granted the Church in spirit what his mother had in the body, the grace of being both mother and virgin<sup>39</sup>.

The passage quoted above directly follows Augustine's exegesis of Sg. 1, 8 ('Unless you know yourself') and his interpretation of the Church as the 'one flock'. To 'live with chastity' must not be taken literally. Chastity refers here to the strict fidelity of the good Christian to ecclesiastical unity. In Sermon 341 Augustine calls it 'virginity of the mind' as opposed to the 'virginity of the body'<sup>40</sup>. The latter is observed only by a small number of people, the bishop of Hippo explains, but the virginity of the mind must exist in every Christian : a married catholic woman is far superior to a heretic virgin<sup>41</sup>. Augustine's praise of Mary's virginity must not be read as an exhortation to ascetic life. Although Augustine refers to the virgin Mary as a model for the Church bride of the Song of Songs, the bishop of Hippo never insists on the Marian reading of the poem. The bride of the Song of Songs is the Church whom Christ wedded in the chaste bridal chamber, i. e. the virgin's womb<sup>42</sup>. Solomon's poem is not applied to the particular story of Mary as an individual but to the ecclesiastical ideal which she represents by her corporeal immaculacy. The mother of Christ is above all seen as a symbol of the unity of the Church. The equation between ecclesiastical

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38. See A. M. LA BONNARDIÈRE, *op. cit.*, p. 228, note 6 : «Il est à remarquer que saint Augustin n'emploie jamais le Cantique des Cantiques en l'appliquant à l'état de la virginité chrétienne (aucune citation dans le *De Sancta Virginitate*)...».

39. Sermon 138, 9, *PL* 38, col. 768, tr. E. HILL p. 390.

40. Sermon 341, 4, *PL* 39, col. 1496 : Augustine warns the congregation against the Arian heresy and exhorts it to preserve the 'virginity of its mind' (*virginitas mentis*). Instead of 'virginity of the mind' we also find the expression 'virginity of the faith' (*fidei virginitas*, see sermon 93, 3, *PL* 38, col. 574). Both terms are equivalent in Augustine's works. See R. HESBERT, «Saint Augustin et la virginité de la foi», *Augustinus Magister*, Paris, 1954, pp. 645-655.

41. Sermon 341, 4, *PL* 39, col. 1496 and *Enarratio II in Ps 90*, 9, *PL* 37, col. 1168.

42. Sermon 147A, 2, ed. G. MORIN, *Sancti Augustini sermones post maurinos reperti*, vol. 1, Rome, 1930, p. 52 : «Listen to it in the holy book which is called the Song of Songs. Holy love songs are to be read there, the bridegroom and the bride, Christ and the Church. And the whole book is a kind of wedding song, such as they call an epithalamium, but one sung at a holy, a chaste bridal chamber [...] *And he like a bridegroom has come forth from his chamber* (Ps. 18, 4-5) ; he has taken to wife, you see, human flesh. His bride-chamber was the virgin's womb, that's where he wedded the Church, to fulfil what had previously been foretold : *And they shall be two in one flesh* (Gn. 2, 24)». Tr. E. HILL, p. 452f.

unity and Marian virginity is plainly expressed in the formula of Sermon 268 : 'Unitas virgo est'<sup>43</sup>.

#### CONCLUSION

Augustine follows Origen's tradition in recognizing in the bride of the Song of Songs an élite composed of holy souls, but his distinction between two levels of membership within the Church (cf. dichotomy *intus esse / constare*) allows him to include the sinners ('the thorns') in the 'garden enclosed'<sup>44</sup>. Augustine takes the weapon of the Donatists and turns it against them by showing that their conception of the Church's virginity is based on a false reading of the Song of Songs. The 'garden enclosed' cannot exclusively contain the pure as it is said to comprise 'lilies' as well as 'thorns'. The bishop of Hippo exhorts the Donatists to redefine their notion of ecclesiastical purity by giving priority to the preservation of the unity of the one flock rather than to the moral righteousness of the Church's members. The Song of Songs becomes the song of unity celebrated by the virgin body of Mary.

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ABSTRACT : Song of Songs 4, 12 ('A garden locked is my sister, my bride, a garden locked, a fountain sealed') was used by the Donatists to justify their refusal to open the gates of the Church to those who had betrayed their faith during the persecution of Diocletian. Augustine refutes the Donatist reading of the verse by showing that the garden described in the Song of Songs contains 'lilies' as well as 'thorns' (cf. Sg. 2, 2). The Donatists, Augustine argues, are wrongly overriding the judgement of God in defining for themselves the division between the just and unrighteous. They should instead concentrate on preserving the unity of the Church. In Augustinian thought the virginity of Mary, i. e. the untouched unity of her body is presented by Augustine as the corporeal illustration of what the Church should be : a united body.

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43. Sermon 268, 3-4, *PL* 38, col. 1235 : «Dominus Christus ex una, unitas virgo est; tenet virginitatem, servat incorruptionem. Ipse Dominus Ecclesiae unitatem commendat Apostolis».

44. The idea of different levels of ecclesiastical membership is already present in Origen. The Alexandrian identifies the bride of the Song of Songs with the perfect. The maidens accompanying her represent those progressing towards perfection. The latter are encouraged to sing with the spouse but cannot yet hear what Christ tells her. See Hom. Ct. 1, 1, *SC* 37bis, pp. 68-70.

RÉSUMÉ : Les Donatistes utilisaient le verset 4, 12 du *Cantique des Cantiques* ('Elle est un jardin fermé, ma sœur, ma fiancée, un jardin clos, une source scellée') pour justifier leur refus d'accueillir dans l'Église les chrétiens qui avaient trahi leur foi durant la persécution de Dioclétien. Augustin réfute l'interprétation donatiste du verset en montrant que le jardin du Cantique contient à la fois 'lys' et 'épines' (cf. *Sg.* 2, 2). Les Donatistes, dans leur volonté de séparer eux-mêmes les hommes bons et mauvais, devancent à tort le jugement divin, comme Augustin. Ils devraient plutôt s'attacher à défendre l'unité de l'Église. Pour Augustin, la virginité de l'Église ne dépend pas de la pureté de chacun des membres mais uniquement de la stricte fidélité de ces derniers à l'unique troupeau (*Jn.* 10, 16). La virginité de Marie, c'est-à-dire l'intégrité de son corps, est, pour Augustin, l'illustration corporelle de ce que l'Église doit être : un corps uni.