

Agustine, Letter to Vincentius (written in the year 408).

Background. The Donatists were a Christian sect that began in the 4th century, in the North African part of the Roman Empire. They thought they were the One True Church, and so that Catholics were not true Christians. Their reasons for this, we will not need to know. (In brief, it had to do with whether christians who had renounced their faith to avoid persecution by the Roman government---in the time before Rome became a Christian empire---were able to administer sacraments, like baptism.)

Agustine was a Catholic bishop in North Africa who advocated for government persecution of Donatists (indeed of all non-Catholic christian sects). In these excerpts, he explains why he thinks this is justified, to someone who thinks the Donatists should be tolerated.

The full letter may be read here: <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102093.htm>

Excerpts from the letter:

[...]

You are of opinion that no one should be compelled to follow righteousness; and yet you read that the householder said to his servants, Whomsoever you shall find, compel them to come in. (Luke 14:23)

[...]

Let us learn, my brother, in actions which are similar to distinguish the intentions of the agents; and let us not ... accuse those who seek men's welfare as if they did them wrong.

[...]

if to inflict persecution were in all cases blameworthy, it would not have been written in the sacred books, Whoever privily slanders his neighbour, him will I persecute. In some cases, therefore, both he that suffers persecution is in the wrong, and he that inflicts it is in the right. But the truth is, that always both the bad have persecuted the good, and the good have persecuted the bad: the former doing harm by their unrighteousness, the latter seeking to do good by the administration of discipline ...what is important to attend to but this: who were on the side of truth, and who on the side of iniquity; who acted from a desire to injure, and who from a desire to correct what was amiss?

[...]

The Emperor, as you know, in that case [mentioned in a deleted section] decreed for the first time that the property of those who were convicted of schism and obstinately resisted the unity of the Church should be confiscated.

[...]

You now see therefore, I suppose, that the thing to be considered when any one is coerced, is not the mere fact of the coercion, but the nature of that to which he is coerced, whether it be good or bad: not that any one can be good in spite of his own will, but that, through fear of suffering what he does not desire, he either renounces his hostile prejudices, or is compelled to examine truth of which he had been contentedly ignorant; and under the influence of this fear repudiates the error which he was wont to defend, or seeks the truth of which he formerly knew nothing, and now willingly holds what he formerly rejected. Perhaps it would be utterly useless to assert this in words, if it were not demonstrated by so many examples. We see not a few men here and there, but many cities, once Donatist, now Catholic, vehemently detesting the diabolical schism, and ardently loving the unity of the Church; and these became Catholic under the influence of that fear which is to you so offensive by the laws of emperors...

I have therefore yielded to the evidence afforded by these instances which my colleagues have laid before me. For originally my opinion was, that no one should be coerced into the unity of Christ, that we must act only by words, fight only by arguments, and prevail by force of reason, lest we should have those whom we knew as avowed heretics feigning themselves to be Catholics. But this opinion of mine was overcome not by the words of those who controverted it, but by the conclusive instances to which they could point.

[...]

How many were bound [...] by the heavy chains of inveterate custom, so that in them was fulfilled the divine saying: A servant (who is hardened) will not be corrected by words; for though he understand, he will not answer! (Proverbs 29:19) How many supposed the sect of Donatus to be the true Church, merely because ease had made them too listless, or conceited, or sluggish, to take pains to examine Catholic truth! How many would have entered earlier had not the calumnies of slanderers, who declared that we offered something else than we do upon the altar of God, shut them out! How many, believing that it mattered not to which party a Christian might belong, remained in the schism of Donatus only because they had been born in it, and no one was compelling them to forsake it and pass over into the Catholic Church!

To all these classes of persons the dread of those laws in the promulgation of which kings serve the Lord in fear has been so useful, that now some say we were willing for this some time ago;

but thanks be to God, who has given us occasion for doing it at once, and has cut off the hesitancy of procrastination! Others say: We already knew this to be true, but we were held prisoners by the force of old custom: thanks be to the Lord, who has broken these bonds asunder, and has brought us into the bond of peace! Others say: We knew not that the truth was here, and we had no wish to learn it; but fear made us become earnest to examine it when we became alarmed, lest, without any gain in things eternal, we should be smitten with loss in temporal things: thanks be to the Lord, who has by the stimulus of fear startled us from our negligence, that now being disquieted we might inquire into those things which, when at ease, we did not care to know! Others say: We were prevented from entering the Church by false reports, which we could not know to be false unless we entered it; and we would not enter unless we were compelled: thanks be to the Lord, who by His scourge took away our timid hesitation, and taught us to find out for ourselves how vain and absurd were the lies which rumour had spread abroad against His Church: by this we are persuaded that there is no truth in the accusations made by the authors of this heresy, since the more serious charges which their followers have invented are without foundation. Others say: We thought, indeed, that it mattered not in what communion we held the faith of Christ; but thanks to the Lord, who has gathered us in from a state of schism, and has taught us that it is fitting that the one God be worshipped in unity.

[...]

...let the kings of the earth serve Christ by making laws for Him and for His cause.

[...]

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