A Late Antique Preacher in Action: Augustine, *Ep.* 29

Abstract: In *Ep.* 29, Augustine describes four sermons he delivered in May 395. A vivid account of the delivery and reception of late antique preaching, the letter shows how Augustine's listeners debated his message, and how Augustine shaped his preaching to win them over. This article situates the events in the social and archeological setting at Hippo, arguing that the laity were not so indifferent or opposed to clerical teaching as has often been supposed. For Augustine, a devout subset of laypeople were important interlocutors, meeting with him, bringing others to church, and becoming convinced even when they had been most resistant. Similar patterns can be traced, less vividly, in many of Augustine's sermons, and, near the end of his life, the experiences of ordinary Christians helped to reshape Augustine's own theology and preaching on the martyrs.

In May 395, Augustine, still a presbyter of the church of Hippo, wrote a letter to his friend, Alypius bishop of Thagaste, in which he described his efforts to restrain drunken celebration (the so-called *laetitia*) in honor of the martyrs, an aim on which he had been focused for some years.[1] This letter, the twenty-ninth in the Maurist edition of Augustine's epistles, is a vital early witness to Augustine's opinions on the martyrs, as well as to the first attempts, spurred by Augustine and the ranking African bishop, Aurelius of Carthage, to reform the customary honors their churches paid the martyrs.[2] Augustine describes several sermons that he delivered over the course of three days in early May, including one at a regular weekday

[1] See *Ep*. 22 (*CCSL* 31: 52-57), to the newly ordained Aurelius of Carthage. The text of *Ep.* 29 may be found in *CCSL* 31: 98-105; see also *CSEL* 34: 114-22. For simplicity, I do not list Augustine's name in citations from his texts. All translations are my own.

[2] See especially Saxer 1980, 141-42, Gessel 1980.

service, one at a service of a regular but secondary holiday in the annual cycle commemorating the main events of the Gospel (Ascension Thursday), and two sermons at morning and evening services on the feast-day of an important local martyr, the one-time bishop Leontius. He also narrates the congregation's reactions to his sermon, within and outside the basilica, and even describes his plans for a sermon that he decided not to give after a private meeting with some laymen. The letter is thus an exceptionally thorough description of the preaching of an influential late antique churchman and of its reception by his congregation in real time. It is, furthermore, a testimony to the social context of Augustine's preaching: to the interactions between Augustine and his congregation, and among the congregants themselves.[3]

The aim of this paper is to draw out of *Ep.* 29 as much information about those interactions as possible, and to use them to paint an unusually detailed picture of one instance of late antique preaching, which may then be set against the generalities on which study of late antique homiletics must often rest.[4] Such a picture holds more than just biographical interest.[5] The sermons Augustine describes in *Ep.* 29 exemplify a ubiquitous homiletic process: exhortation against received customs perceived by bishops (or, in this case, a

[3] Cf. Saxer 1980, 142, and the schematic overview in Mandouze 1968, 645-52.

[4] I will not, therefore, investigate important but oft-studied topics such as the conciliar reform-efforts (Klöckener 2002), Augustine's own activity therein (Saxer 1980, 133-49, and the study of *Ep.* 29 by Chabi 2019), the religious-political setting (Merdinger 2009), or—except for a closing comment—the generalities of Augustine's evolution on martyr-veneration (van Bavel 1995) and the content of his preaching on martyrs (Dupont 2014, 137-59, den Boeft 1989).

[5] For which, see van der Meer 1961, 520-25.

presbyter handpicked to preach in a bishop's stead) to be insufficiently pious or imperfectly Christian.[6] Historians often view such exhortations with hermeneutical suspicion, as marks of the chasm that opened between the preachers' conceptions of proper Christian behavior and the lifestyles of ordinary laypeople.[7] The existence of those whom older scholarship called "semi-Christians" was indeed an inescapable reality for late antique preachers.[8] Focus on the complex contours of their beliefs and practices has, however, tended to force out those ordinary Christians who did, in fact, agree with their preachers, so much so, in fact, that "ordinary" or "everyday" can function as virtual synonyms for "lax," "less devout."[9] The other side of the question has less often been explored: how did laypeople come to agree, as some did, with preaching at first distasteful to them, and how did preachers change their presentation, if not their convictions, to win them over?

A rare description of the immediate reception, at and just after delivery, of the sermons of one of the most prolific late antique preachers, *Ep.* 29 offers a fruitful corrective. It is, in fact, nothing less than a blow-by-blow account of a specific homiletic campaign as it actually unfolded, of preaching in action and not just (as in brilliant disquisitions in *De*

[6] See, for example, the surveys in Grig 2017, Catarinella 2014 (sermons delivered, across the Empire, against "pagan" New Year's festivals), and Sandwell 2007 (John Chrysostom's Antioch).

[7] Influential studies include Markus 1990, 1-17, 107-23, Rebillard 2012, 61-91, and Cameron 2011, 783-801; Kahlos 2020, 176-94, offers a thorough literature. On popular Christian piety, see now Frankfurter 2018.

[8] Guignebert 1923, still offering much on which to reflect.

[9] E.g., Kahlos 2020, 177; "everyday Christianity": Rebillard 2012, 8, 12, 96. Contrast the more moderate study of Eastern Christian "simple believers" by Tannous 2018, 11-82.

catechizandis rudibus and *De doctrina christiana*) in theory.[10] To be sure, the letter is not an unvarnished, objective window into lay attitudes toward Augustine's preaching. We have only Augustine's report, and must take his word for it, if we are to say anything at all. Nonetheless, though Augustine does present the sermons' ultimate result as the one at which he had aimed, the vicissitudes in the congregation's attitudes and in Augustine's own approach are clearly visible. Augustine is, at a key juncture, at a loss, and his laypeople are recognizably the same unruly, self-willed congregation who would embarrass him sixteen years later, by trying to force a visiting ascetic-philanthropist to become a presbyter of their provincial city.[11]

The widespread skepticism over lay attention to episcopal strictures has received its most trenchant and concrete form in Ramsay MacMullen's attempts to calculate church attendance from archeological data.[12] Refining his calculations and revisiting the social backdrop, I will argue, in line with recent studies of Greek and Gallic congregations, that there was a strong core of laymen (and, less visible, laywomen) who engaged seriously with Augustine's teaching. They did not necessarily put it into consistent practice, and indeed Augustine's own sermons make it clear that martyr-feasting continued. Nonetheless, such laypeople did care what he said. They wanted to be "good" Christians, and so wanted to

[10] The former less famous but especially evocative: *Cat.* 2.3-15.23 (*CCSL* 46: 122-48); *De Doctr. Chr.* 4, esp. 1.2-6.10, 7.21-19.38, 22.51-31.64 (*CCSL* 32: 116-23, 131-44, 157-67), with a brief description of a sermon delivered in Caesarea in Mauritania at 24.53 (*CCSL* 32: 159-60).

[11] For the turmoil over the attempted ordination of Pinianus, husband of the younger Melania, see *Ep.* 126 (*CCSL* 31B: 185-94), with Brown 2012, 324-25, and Cecconi 1988.

[12] Most thoroughly, MacMullen 2009.

know how a good Christian ought to behave. Augustine himself, on the other hand, was willing both to hear their objections and to participate, by private meeting and by preaching, in the debate that his sermons provoked. Though that interactive process can ordinarily be glimpsed only in vague and indirect ways, the mutual regard of preacher and congregation can be found even behind other sermons that might seem, at first glance, to showcase lay hostility or indifference.

The sermons and their reception: Augustine and his listeners in dialogue

Ep. 29 is transmitted without an address in its sole extant manuscript, which labels it (after slight emendation) "A letter from a presbyter of Hippo Regius to Alypius, bishop of Thagaste, on the saint's day of Leontius, sometime bishop of Hippo."[13] It thus belongs to the brief period in which Augustine had taken over preaching in the catholic church at Hippo from its Greek-born bishop, Valerius.[14] Augustine begins by saying that an unspecified bit of church business, perhaps also to do with the reform of martyr-cult, must wait for the

[13] *CCSL* 31: 98, *epistola presbyteri Hipponensium Regiorum ad Alypium episcopum Thagastensium de die natalis Leontii quondam* (MS: *Leonti quoddam*) *episcopi Hipponensium*. The manuscript, London, Brit. Libr. Add. 43460 (Cheltenham, Phillipps 12261), dates from the end of the eighth century (see under heading 51 on *CCSL* 31: xv). Another manuscript, described as *antiquissimum exemplar bibliothecae PP. Cistercensium S. Crucis in Jerusalem in Urbe* at *PL* 33: 114, was known to the Maurists, who produced the letter's *editio princeps*.

[14] Possidius, *Vita Augustini* 5.2-5 (ed. Bastiaensen 1975, 140-42; on Augustine's predecessor, Cameron 2009.

impending arrival of a *frater* named Macharius.[15] He can, however, report the good result—"a matter worthy of conversation by letter" (*digna res epistolari colloquio*)—that Alypius' solicitude has helped to bring about.

Sermon	Date and Occasion	Text	Audience
1, *Ep.* 29.2	May 2, 395, regular weekday service	Matthew 7	*pauci*
2, *Ep.* 29.4–7	May 3, 395, Ascension Thursday	Cleansing of the temple; selections from Ex. 32, 1 Cor. 5, 6, 11, Gal. 5, Ps. 88 [LXX]	*frequens multitudo*
3, *Ep.* 29.8 (sermon planned, not delivered)	May 4, 395	Ezek. 33:9, among others	Plans changed after meeting with laymen
4, *Ep.* 29.8-10 (sermon actually delivered)	May 4, 395, morning service	1 Peter 4:1-3	Smaller group than in afternoon service
5, *Ep.* 29.11	May 4, 395, Feast of St. Leontius of Hippo	2 Psalms, Phil. 3:19, 1 Cor. 6:13	*maior quam ante meridiem affuit multitudo*; *non parua multitudo*

[15] *Ep.* 29.1 (*CCSL* 31: 98).

Table 1: Augustine's sermons in *Ep.* 29

Augustine narrates a sequence of sermons (laid out in table 1, above), of which none seems to survive.[16] The starting point was a visit by Alypius to Hippo, in which either he or Augustine had (it seems) announced the intended restrictions on martyr-veneration. Augustine describes the aftermath in one rolling sentence:

> When, after your departure, it had been announced to us that people were making a tumult and saying that they could not bear for that festivity to be prohibited—whose real name of drunkenness they tried to hide by calling it "happiness" (*laetitia*)—just as was already announced when you were present also, it befell us, opportunely, by the secret ordination of almighty God, that on Wednesday the sermon was to be delivered in sequence on that chapter in the Gospel: *Do not give a holy thing to the dogs, nor cast your pearls before swine*.[17]

There followed, Augustine says, a sermon on the passage, in which he exhorted his listeners "to see how nefarious it would be to do within the walls of the church, in the name of religion, something that, if they were to continue to do it in their homes, they ought to be kept from the holy thing and the church's pearls." (Or at least one assumes Augustine delivered the sermon: the verbs here are all third-person passive, where Augustine later uses a mix of those forms with the first-person active.)

The congregants, who were relatively few that day, received the message happily. The other catholics of the town did not: "But when that sermon was aired outside by those who had been present, according to each person's ability and degree of support, it had many

[16] de Bruyne 1931, 189-91.

[17] *Ep.* 29.2 (*CCSL* 31: 98).

contradictors."[18] Augustine followed up with another sermon on the next day, Ascension Thursday (on this dating, more below). This later sermon began with Jesus' expulsion of merchants and moneylenders from the temple (in which Gospel's account, Augustine does not say), and was carefully prepared. Augustine's description of this sermon takes up over a third of the epistle.[19] It was a virtuoso performance, punctuated by the handing back and forth of biblical books, from which he read lengthy "prepared readings" from Exodus and St. Paul's letters, and by his own "groans of admonition" about the dangers of partying with drunkards.[20] Between readings from 1 Corinthians and Galatians, he alluded to the Gospel-passage, "where it is said about the false prophets: *From their fruits you will know them*," and thus to a sermon that he had delivered on that text on the previous day (likely the first sermon he reports).[21]

The second sermon concluded in an emphatic moral appeal:

> So far as I was able, and so far as the danger itself pressed me and the Lord deemed meet to give me strength, I set before their eyes the danger common to them, who had been committed to us, and to us who were going to give an account for them to the prince of pastors, by whose humility, the reproaches whose marks he bore, the beating, spitting, and marks of hands upon his face, his crown of thorns, cross, and

[18] *Ep.* 29.3 (*CCSL* 31: 99): *sed haec quamuis grate accepta fuerint, tamen quia pauci conuenerant, non erat satisfactum tanto negotio. iste autem sermo cum ab eis qui aderant, pro cuiusque facultate ac studio, foris uentilaretur, multos habuit contradictores.*

[19] *Ep.* 29.3-7 (*CCSL* 31: 99-102).

[20] *Ep.* 29.4 (*CCSL* 31: 99): *mihi praeparatae lectiones suggerendae tenebantur*; 29.5 (*CCSL* 31: 100), *ingemiscendo admonens*.

[21] *Ep.* 29.6 (*CCSL* 31: 101).

> blood I adjured them that, if they had made themselves stumble in any way, they should at least have pity on us and think of the great love of the venerable old man Valerius for me, who had not hesitated, on their account, to lay upon me the burden, so dangerous, of preaching the words of truth.[22]

But he, Augustine said, again quoting scripture from memory (this time Ps. 88[LXX]), believed that God "would visit" the disobedient "with the rod and whip, and not permit them to be damned with the world." Now, he tells Alypius, God provided him with the necessary "mindset and ability" (*animos facultatemque*) for the task: "I did not stir up their tears with my tears; but when such things were spoken, I confess that I, met by their tears, could not hold back my own. And since we had now likewise wept, with the fullest hope for their correction, I made an end to my sermon."

Augustine's account is not yet finished, but it has reached a climax in the shared weeping of preacher and congregation. To sum up what has happened thus far: a visit from the bishop of Thagaste, led, presumably through the delivery of a sermon against martyr-feasting, to shouting or other commotion (hence *tumultuari*, 29.2), perhaps in the cathedral of Hippo, more likely outside. Augustine says, after all, that the uproar was *reported* to him, both while Alypius was present and after he had left (*nuntiatum esset ... nuntiabatur*). The immediate sequel was a sermon preached on a regular Wednesday service. The topic of martyr-cult was on Augustine's mind, and had been aired by Alypius already, yet Augustine

[22] *Ep.* 29.7 (*CCSL* 31: 101).

had not orchestrated the sermon accordingly: the reading of a suitable Gospel-text was what some might call coincidence, Augustine, providential.[23]

The congregation at this weekday service was a small one, and already convinced, or so their "grateful" acceptance of Augustine's arguments suggests, of the need for liturgical reform. They were (one supposes) particularly devout "regulars," who had already absorbed Augustine's teaching. Though not all equally zealous or equally able to explain and defend their presbyter's reasoning, they spread the word "outside" the church (*foris*, 29.3). The oral transmission of key content from the sermon led, in turn, to public contradiction from some considerable number of local Christians. These Augustine answered in the sermon on the next day, when the controversy had helped to turn the few congregants into a *frequens multitudo*; some of the same people were probably still present, as he expected the congregants to remember what he had preached in the last sermon.[24]

All this, it seems, had taken place in the span of about twenty-four hours. The only reference to anchor the events in the calendar is Augustine's description of the day of the great sermon as *dies quadragesimae*. "The day of the fortieth" might be Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, but this comports neither (as Louis-Sébastien Le Nain de Tillemont saw long ago, and Othmar Perler put beyond doubt) with the work's transmitted title, which

[23] Cf. *Serm.* Dolbeau 5.1 (ed. Dolbeau 1993: 73). Margoni-Kögler 2010, 153-4 n. 434, suggests that the passage mentioned in *Ep.* 29.2 was part of a "*lectio continua* der Bergpredigt."

[24] *Ep.* 29.6 (*CCSL* 31: 101).

places it at the feast of St. Leontius, nor with Augustine's own description of his preaching.[25] The passage just quoted from 29.6 makes it clear that he had preached the day before on Matt. 7:20, while the starting-point for the sermon of 29.2 (delivered on a Wednesday) was Matt. 7:6. The most parsimonious explanation is that *dies quadragesimae* is equivalent to *dies quadragesima*, the "fortieth day" after Easter, that is, Ascension Thursday, which fell on May 3 in 395, the year in which, as Perler has established, the letter must have been written. The aim was not Lenten purification from sins, of which Augustine says nothing,[26] but a post-Paschal correction of joyful excess.

Augustine was not done. "On the following day, when the day had dawned for which they were accustomed to preparing their jaws and stomachs, it was reported to me that some, even of those who had been present for the sermon, had not yet stopped their murmuring."[27] Their objection was simple: "Why now?" The new restriction changed accepted custom, and seemed to impugn the Christianity of the current leadership's predecessors. Augustine, nonplussed, was ready (so he tells Alypius) to quote a suitable passage—"The scout is absolved, if he has reported a danger, even if those to whom he has reported it do not want to take warning" (a paraphrase of Ezekiel 33:7, 9)—tear his clothes, and leave the church. He was forestalled, however, by an event he again credits to divine foresight: "For, before the hour on which we were going to ascend the *exhedra*, those very same people came in to me whom I had heard had complained about the attack on ancient custom; and, having received

[25] Perler 1955, 302-4; see also Perler 1965, 32-33. A thorough discussion, still useful, in Tillemont 1710, 974-5; cf. *PL* 33: 117-18 n. a. The unlikely placement in Lent persists: esp. Teske 2001, 96.

[26] Thus already the Maurist editors, in *PL* 33: 117-18 n. a.

[27] *Ep.* 29.8 (*CCSL* 31: 102).

them pleasantly, I converted them with a few words to a sound opinion."[28] He thus abandoned his original reading and gave a different, brief sermon in which he explained that the martyr-feasts had been introduced as a concession to the mass of pagans who had joined the church after the ending of persecution; but the time had now come for them to "begin to live according to Christ's will."[29]

The situation mirrors the dialogue Augustine reported ca. 408, likewise without naming or even numbering his interlocutors, at the beginning of *De diuinatione daemonum*. There, the *fratres laici*, as he calls his visitors, had spoken with him "when we had sat down in the accustomed place" before an Eastertide service, and sparred with him over the operation of pagan oracles, arguing that the public cults had formerly been acceptable to God, as he would not otherwise have allowed them.[30] Sometimes seen as a sincere statement of opinion by Christians less rigorist than Augustine himself, their arguments were, Augustine suggests, actually an attempt to play the Devil's advocate: to formulate answers to pagans by contradicting their bishop.[31] That these men bothered to seek his opinion shows that they were serious about getting their Christianity right, but they would not immediately yield ground without understanding why Augustine thought what he did. Likewise the recalcitrant

[28] *Ep.* 29.8 (*CCSL* 31: 102-3): *namque ante horam qua exhedram ascenderemus, ingressi sunt ad me idem ipsi quos audieram de oppugnatione uetustae consuetudinis fuisse conquestos; quos blande acceptos, paucis uerbis in sententiam sanam transtuli.*

[29] *Ep.* 29.9 (*CCSL* 31: 103).

[30] *De div. daem.* 1.1-2.6 (*CSEL* 41: 599–603); for the dating "between 406 and 410," den Boeft (1999): 519.

[31] *Pace* Brown 2004, 111. *De div. daem.* 1.1 (*CSEL* 41: 599): *quamuis christiani essent et magis contradicendo quaerere uiderentur, quid paganis responderi oporteret*.

congregants of *Ep.* 29, who had, over a decade before the writing of *De diuinatione daemonum*, challenged Augustine with appeals not just to past African practice, but also to the drunkards who no doubt came (so Augustine admits) to the massive basilica of St. Peter at Rome.[32] Such laypersons were not unlike the worried African landholder Publicola or the Spanish eccentric Consentius, two men of very different education and theological abilities who approached Augustine for his advice by letter, or the *fratres laici* who induced him to write *De fide et operibus*: laymen to be sure, he says in the *Retractationes*, but serious about scripture.[33]

When Augustine delivered his revised sermon, he was able, he reports to Alypius, to see that "all had come into a good will, having contemned evil things." How he could tell this, he does not say, but probably through spoken responses: he expected expressions of emotion from his listeners, and appears to have been able to judge that a congregation had understood technical points of theology before he had explained them.[34] In any case, he "exhorted them to be present, at noon, for the divine readings and Psalms; thus it was

[32] *Ep.* 29.10 (*CCSL* 31: 103).

[33] Publicola: *Ep.* 46-47 (*CCSL* 31: 198-208), with Bodin 2012–2013 and Lepelley 2002 on his beliefs, person, and historical circumstances. Consentius, author of *Ep.* 11*-12* (*CSEL* 88: 51-80) and recipient of *Contra Mendacium* (thus 1.1, *CSEL* 41: 469, *multa mihi legenda misisti, Consenti frater carissime, multa mihi legenda misisti*), knew his Classics much better: Wankenne 1983. He may also, so Wankenne, have been Augustine's correspondent in *Ep.* 119-20 (*CCSL* 31B: 137-59) and 205 (*CSEL* 57: 323-39), but Van Dam 1986: 532-35 has rendered the identification doubtful. *De fide et operibus* (*CSEL* 41: 35-97): see *Retract.* 2.38 (*CCSL* 57: 121), and now Pignot 2018

[34] *Serm.* 52.20 (*CCSL* 41Aa: 77); *De Doctr. Chr.* 4.14.53 (*CCSL* 32: 159).

pleasing to celebrate that day much more purely and sincerely; and certainly it would be clear, from the multitude of those who came together, who was following his mind, and who his stomach." A greater "multitude" was present that afternoon again, and Augustine, coming with Valerius, preached a second time that day (against his will, he says), giving thanks to God and contrasting the sobriety of their own celebration with that "in the basilica of the heretics." Thus, the Vespers were performed with suitable holiness, and, after he and the bishop had left, "The brothers spoke a hymn in the same place, with no small multitude of either sex staying and singing Psalms until sundown."[35]

Augustine's conclusion, marred a little by his report, in the last section, of problems with Donatist circumcellions, shows a catholic church united in holy song in one of the basilicas of Hippo.[36] Remarkable throughout the letter is the degree of interaction between the preacher and a congregation that swells and shrinks from service to service. Alypius' visit had brought open dissension, in reaction to his preaching or Augustine's; Augustine's own improvised sermon galvanized a core of the already or at least easily convinced; his longer sermon, delivered with sustained emotional appeal to their love for Christ, for Valerius, for himself, brought their tears, and their tears, his; he then met—at their initiative, not his own—with the most articulate naysayers, shaped his next sermon in response, and, at the end of three days' sustained homiletical campaign, found the desired result.

This is, of course, Augustine's representation of the matter and likely as carefully rhetorical in its delivery as his planned clothes-tearing would have been.[37] His own future

[35] *Ep.* 29.11 (*CCSL* 31: 105); on the text of this passage, see further below.

[36] *Ep.* 29.12 (*CCSL* 31: 105).

[37] The letter is hardly more private than any of Augustine's: see the stimulating discussion by Mratschek 2017.

warnings against venerating the martyrs the wrong way are caution enough against taking the congregation's peaceful, decorously restrained singing as the final word.[38] Aurelius may, as Augustine would assert in a later sermon, have succeeded in ending all-night dances in honor of the martyrs at Carthage;[39] perhaps Augustine began to achieve some such success at Hippo, but it will not have reached completion after a single week. Nevertheless, the letter shows not only that his sermons could persuade local laity not, on that occasion, to feast a prominent local martyr, but also how his preaching could spread from a small core of "regulars" to a wider audience, by word-of-mouth, by the controversy it provoked, and by his own readiness to answer his listeners' uncertainties in between services.

Gauging the size and nature of the congregations of *Ep.* 29

The letter to Alypius is a witness at once to Augustine's will to adapt his teaching to his congregation's understanding, and to the willingness of some part of his congregation to assimilate his teaching. Here we can see, in the energetic span of a few days and not across decades of sermons of uncertain date and little context, that "Christianisation" was (as Éric Rebillard has said) "not ... a one-way process but ... an interactive one."[40] The situation parallels that of two of Augustine's *Enarrationes* on Psalm 32 (LXX), delivered in Carthage in

[38] Esp. *Serm.* Dolbeau 26.10-13 (ed. Dolbeau 1992b: 97-101), with Brown 1998a; cf. *Civ. dei* 8.27 (*CCSL* 47: 248-9).

[39] *Serm.* 311.5 (*PL* 38: 1415).

[40] Rebillard 1997, 94, after analysis of just such a loose sequence of Augustine's sermons on death. The dating of Augustine's sermons is generally tenuous: thus a three-article series by Drobner 2000, 2003, 2004; but see the moderating remarks of Dolbeau 2003.

September 403.[41] The first sermon, delivered at the *Mappalia*, the church at Cyprian's tomb, on the martyr's vigil (that is, Sunday, September 13), had closed with Augustine's acknowledgment that he was wearing out his listeners.[42] The second, delivered at the *mensa Cypriani* that Wednesday, resumed with the last verse Augustine had mentioned (Ps. 32:5) and concluded with an appeal to his listeners to invite their absent brethren to the next day's service, at yet a third church, the *basilica Tricilarum*, where he would report the measures of a recent council on the Donatists (the event that allows for the dating to 403).[43] Augustine seems in these sermons to treat spreading of news about his preaching as routine, yet no evidence remains for what that congregation thought of his message or did about his request. *Ep.* 29 gives a more vivid sense of the ways in which Augustine's preaching could work with the church's calendar of festivals to bring in a wider audience than those, readily convinced, who would come to an ordinary service.

How wide an audience? How far did Augustine's message—the message, for now, of a rising presbyter in the relatively small catholic church of Hippo—penetrate into the wider community? Augustine uses vague terms such as *pauci* or *multitudo*, and says nothing about any congregation's social composition, except in asserting, if a plausible emendation to *Ep.* 29.11 is correct, that "a multitude of either sex" joined in the singing.[44] That women were

[41] On these sermons, see further Margoni-Kögler (2010), 403-7.

[42] *En. Ps.* 32/2.1.12 (*CSEL* 93/1B: 277); date in Perler and Maier 1969, 248.

[43] *En. Ps.* 32/2.2.1-2; 29 (*CSEL* 93/1B: 277-78, 310-13; quotation from 313). The council was held on August 25, 403: *CCSL* 149: 208-11. On these three churches, Ennabli 1997, 21-26, 34.

[44] *PL* 33: 120 nn. 2 and a, suggests reading either *usque* or *utriusque sexus* for the manuscripts' *non parua multitudine utriusque ad obscuratum diem manente atque psallente*;

present in numbers was probable anyway, as his own account, in a later sermon, of martyr-feasts at Carthage makes clear.[45] This early in Augustine's career, the Donatist church of Hippo was more numerous than Valerius' catholic congregation; hence the polemic with which Augustine closed his sermonic campaign.[46] Marking out properly catholic behavior from "heretical" was, however, only a secondary element in the campaign as a whole. The point, made to the absent Alypius, is that their efforts to reform the congregation's veneration of the martyrs have, by the help of God, borne visible fruit at last. Precise numbers are not in view.

For a sense of the congregation Augustine was dealing with, we must set the events his letter reports within the limited archeological evidence. In an erudite and staunchly provocative book, Ramsay MacMullen has traced a division been a "first," literate, élite, bishop-centered church and a "second," popular church, focused on the cult of the martyrs and little attuned to bishops' sermons, which on his view hardly spoke to their situation.[47]

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the latter reading was accepted by Al. Goldbacher (*CSEL* 34: 122), while Kl. D. Daur prints *<utri>usque* (*CCSL* 31: 105).

[45] *Serm.* Dolbeau 2.5 (ed. Dolbeau 1992a: 65-66).

[46] Cf., e.g., Possidius, *Vita Augustini* 7.2 (ed. Bastiaensen 1975, 146), who makes Augustine's efforts the beginning of a catholic resurgence in a mostly Donatist Africa. For an overview of developments in controversy with the "Donatists" early in Augustine's career, see Lancel and Alexander 1999, 616-19, with Shaw 2011, 475-79, on his efforts to inspire popular support for the catholic cause. On Augustine's growing acquaintance with Donatist Christianity, see Fitzgerald 2009.

[47] MacMullen 2009, developing a case that evolved from MacMullen 1989 to MacMullen 1997, 10-11; see also MacMullen 2010.

Assessing the excavated basilicas, MacMullen posits that each congregant needed at least one square meter, with yet more given over to church columns, barriers between men and women, space reserved for clergy, and other architectural limitations.[48] Thus, five, perhaps seven, percent of the population of a given Roman city could have fit into its churches.[49]

MacMullen's interpretation of the material evidence is too often tendentious,[50] and his separation between episcopal and popular "churches" implies too stark a divide between bishops' listeners and the people the sermons criticize.[51] Augustine, at least, does not appear

[48] MacMullen 2009, 12-14.

[49] I leave aside the question of the urban-rural divide; on preaching in the African countryside, see Dossey 2010, 147-72.

[50] A case in point: the "gigantic church" at Tipasa is allowed, once "the chancel area and the stylobate area" are subtracted, room for about 1500, or "7 or 8 per cent of the population ... at least if they were packed in like sardines" (I fuse the discussion at MacMullen 2009, 55, with the archeological note at 131). The *quadratum populi* of the church covered ca. 1800 m^2 (for a description, Gui, Duval, and Caillet 1992, 1: 21-24, with plans and images at 2: xxvi-xxviii); it ought to have held over a quarter of Tipasa's population (estimated by MacMullen at ca. 20,000) under close crowding.

[51] The evidence of *Ep.* 29 often supports the criticisms proffered, from earlier evidence or more general considerations, by Robinson 2017, 225-42. Qualifications and rebuttals to MacMullen's earlier arguments are offered by Dossey 2010, 148-49, Clark 2001, Allen and Mayer 2004, 34-40, Mayer 1999, and Rousseau 1998. Tannous 2018, 55, is closer to the mark: "Rather than a two-tiered world, we are instead dealing with a world in which there was a continuum of understanding and engagement with doctrinal questions, one where there were both clergy who were theologically unschooled and laity who were theologically

to have thought, when he criticized the martyr-cult or, for that matter, divinatory rituals popular among those he called "false" or "bad" Christians, that he was rebuking people who simply never came to church.[52] Indeed, in a famous passage from one of the sermons published in newly expanded form by François Dolbeau, the "uneducated" (*imperiti*) err by offering the wrong kind of devotion, an "adoration" of columns, inside the basilica.[53] In another, he singles out for particular chiding those who had not fasted yesterday, but have come to the church today, even though others are still celebrating the "pagan" festival that had previously distracted them, too.[54] Deviation from episcopal norms was rife within the congregation itself, and episcopal teaching could penetrate into the consciousness of less wealthy or educated Christians, as Jaclyn Maxwell has shown in the case of Greek preachers, especially John Chrysostom.[55]

MacMullen's dichotomous framework is of doubtful utility, therefore, but his numbers still provide a concrete starting point for thinking about the immediate recipients of Augustine's teaching. The calculation must first be made more precise, and therefore more generous. Each congregant is quite unlikely to have occupied a full square meter. An exacting study of the capacity of ancient synagogues has shown that a standing congregation should

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literate." For a view of private Christianity less insistent on a dichotomy with episcopal piety, see Bowes 2008.

[52] Cf., among abundant references to *mali* or *falsi christiani*, e.g., *Enarr. in Psalm.* 40.3, 88/2.14, 91.7, 99.12 (*CCSL* 38: 450-1, 39: 1244, 1283-4, 1400-1).

[53] *Serm.* Dolbeau 26, cited with secondary literature at n. 38, above.

[54] *Serm.* Dolbeau 22.26 (ed. Dolbeau 1994: 196).

[55] Maxwell 2017; it is worth observing, however, with Tannous 2018, 29-31, that a great city such as Constantinople will have been exceptional.

not need much more than half the amount MacMullen allots.[56] Some modern authorities allow even tighter packing: English fire-safety regulations, for example, allot 0.3 m^2 per person in standing audience-areas, or 0.5 m^2 in crowded places with frequent movement.[57] More space would, as MacMullen argues, have been needed for kneeling and so forth, and for those in honored places to sit down. An African church might have seen rather less space lost than he supposes, since the archeological evidence does not suggest regular separation of sexes.[58] Augustine himself indicates, in a sermon probably delivered in 403 or 404, that it was a recent innovation at Carthage, where Aurelius was trying to prevent breaches of decorum, such as the girl-hunting that Augustine himself had once pursued.[59] As MacMullen recognized in his earlier, text-focused publications, attendance at crowded holiday services would have been higher than on other days.[60] Augustine, for one, speaks of churches so full they can hardly fit the whole congregation, and of the crowd "stuffed," even on a regular Sunday service, into a church's "crannies."[61] These larger congregations might have exceeded three times MacMullen's estimation.

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[56] Spigel 2012, 61-62, 341, with Robinson 2017, 235-42.

[57] Table D1, "Floor Space Factors," *The Building Regulations 2010, Fire Safety, Approved Document B, vol. 2: Buildings other than dwellings* (2019 edition), 155, available at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fire-safety-approved-document-b (last accessed October 9, 2020).

[58] Duval 1998, 190-3.

[59] *Serm. Dolbeau* 2.5 (ed. Dolbeau 1992: 65-66).

[60] MacMullen 1989, 507-8.

[61] *Serm.* Denis 17.8 (ed. Morin 1930, 88, at Bulla Regia), Mai 126.1 (ed. Morin 1930, 356).

We can thus approximate. On the Wednesday on which he took over the campaign from Alypius, Augustine was most likely preaching at the church named, in the transmitted titles of two sermons, the *basilica Leontiana*.[62] This was a large basilica, or so Augustine says, and was tentatively identified by Erwan Marec with a five-naved building excavated at Hippo.[63] Marec's five-naved basilica would have offered a relatively confined space to the congregation: rather more than 232.5 m^2, less about 5 m^2 for the bases of twelve columns. The part he identified as the *presbyterium* was 119 m^2, while an atrium would have allowed 192 m^2 for overflow of feasting worshippers.[64] Perhaps too small to be the *basilica Leontiana* of *Ep.* 29, and in the judgment of other scholars not a church at all, the building is one conceivable proxy for the *basilica Leontiana*.[65] So is a larger, three-naved church that may (on Marec's view) have been the *basilica Pacis*, the cathedral of Hippo, and would have had about 400 m^2 of space available to the congregation.[66] The first of Augustine's sermons, delivered after Alypius and Augustine had kicked off the controversy, would thus have seen

[62] *Serm.* 260, 262 (*PL* 38: 1201, 1207), *in basilica Leontiana*; Perler 1955, 302-4.

[63] *Ep.* 29.6 (*CCSL* 31: 101): *et si potestas daretur, totum tam magnae basilicae spatium turbis epulantium ebriorumque complerent*. Marec 1958, 222-25.

[64] Description and images in Marec 1958, 183-209; I calculate from the dimensions on 186 (atrium), 189 (naves; these were not perfectly rectangular, so I use the figures for the shorter sides), and 199 (*presbyterium*, flanked by aisles).

[65] Whether the building was indeed a church has been doubted: Michel 2006, 72 n. 22; it is omitted by Gui, Duval, and Caillet 1992.

[66] MacMullen 2009, 129; Marec 1958, 23-181, 225-34; succinct description in Gui, Duval, and Caillet 1992, 1: 346-9. For doubts, see Laporte 2015, who suggests a location for the cathedral at archeological finds to the south.

perhaps a couple hundred attendees, visibly only "a few," relative to the building's size. The later services, in turn, could have brought in two (or, in a church like the larger basilica, as many as five or six) times that number, of both sexes and, granted the popularity of martyr-veneration, all of the city's social strata.[67] He was, in any case, speaking to multiple only partially overlapping audiences from day to day, or even from canonical hour to canonical hour, as he makes clear in his account of the final day of preaching, on the feast of St. Leontius itself.

For the empiricist historian, a troubling disconnect remains. Estimates of the population of Hippo are hazardous, but run to at least 30,000.[68] On any calculation, only a small proportion of the population was present to hear any one of Augustine's sermons. The other, "Donatist" congregation represented a significantly larger portion of the inhabitants and would presumably have assembled in greater numbers. Still, it will have been limited by their basilica's size to (one guesses, at an extreme) a few thousand attendees.[69] Neither bishop of Hippo can, therefore, have presided over the veneration of Leontius by any great proportion of the population. However, Augustine does not seem aware of the rampant "ancestor worship" that ought, on MacMullen's hypothesis, to have attracted much (even most) of the population to the cemeteries of Hippo, a city that Augustine could, as a bishop,

[67] Gessel 1990, 83, would allow "etwa 2000 Gläubige" in the larger basilica; that seems too generous a reckoning.

[68] Gessel 1990, 84-85.

[69] No trace of this basilica seems to have been found (Marec 1958, 219-22). His five-naved basilica—if indeed it was a church—and the three-naved basilica he identified with the *basilica Pacis* offer a plausible approximation for its size, the great church of Tipasa (n. 50) a generous upper bound.

characterize as entirely Christian, except for some Jews.[70] Whenever that sermon was delivered, Augustine was too optimistic. We know, for example, of a prominent landholder of the early 410s who was an ardent pagan, and such people might easily have been found up to the end of Augustine's life.[71] They certainly were at Carthage and Calama.[72] Much had also happened over the years to bring pagans into at least outward conformity with Christianity.[73] Perhaps, at the outset of Augustine's career, there simply were fewer Christians. Still, in the sermon he delivered on the morning of May 4, 395, he took for granted that the church had already expanded enormously over the preceding decades.[74] The Christians of the city cannot have been so few that all of them fit into a couple of basilicas. In some sermons, Augustine blames low attendance on the public *ludi*, but there is no such distraction here.[75] Neither is the failure to mention other, martyr-celebrating Christians a simple artifact of Augustine's rhetoric—of a will to look the other way from continued lay deviance from his teaching. Doubtless, the letter is trying to present a particular image of

[70] "Ancestor worship": especially MacMullen 2010, focused on Rome. *Serm.* 196.4 (*PL* 38: 1020).

[71] Marcellinus, *ap.* August. *Ep.* 136.3 (*CCSL* 31B: 255).

[72] Cf. the late *Ep.* 1A*.2 (*CSEL* 88: 8), giving instructions on distribution of *Civ. Dei* to the "superstitious" friends of the catechumen Firmus; *Civ. dei* 22.8 (*CCSL* 48: 822) describes the conversion of a staunchly un-Christian curial from Calama.

[73] There is no fully satisfactory narrative of the vicissitudes of North African paganism in Augustine's lifetime. Shaw 2011, 195-259, is lucid and interesting, but not always correct in detail; see also Lepelley 1998.

[74] *Ep.* 29.9.

[75] E.g. *Serm.* 361.4 (*PL* 39: 1600).

Augustine and of the congregation at Hippo. But Augustine does not pretend that all the laity had agreed right away, as he could easily have been tempted to do, nor does he even begin to suggest that he and Valerius have brought about general agreement with proper, "catholic" belief. Why not mention the "bad catholics," the lax "ordinary Christians" of modern scholarship, as well as the Donatists?

An answer lies to hand, too obvious for Augustine to have needed to spell it out for Alypius: most of the people of Hippo were busy, even on a saint's day, with the ordinary business of their lives. Augustine does not mention celebrations in the cemeteries, because they were no more salient, if they were taking place, than the hawking of wares, bringing in of a spring's agricultural goods, kitchen work, building repairs, manufacturing, court cases, and other day-to-day occupations that demanded most people's attention.[76] Those who both could and would take the afternoon and evening off were already a select group and, as MacMullen has averred, probably skewed, as were some early modern Christian congregations, toward the sufficiently well-off.[77] One should nonetheless not exaggerate the wealth of Augustine's congregants. In other sermons, his listeners included many people who, while not perhaps poorest of the poor, were certainly not from the urban élite. Thus, in a Paschal sermon, possibly delivered on April 9, 418, that quotes the Neoplatonist philosopher

[76] For a survey of human activities that, though permissible for the Christian, may still distract from God, see, e.g., *En. Ps.* 136.3 (*CCSL* 40: 1965): Augustine speaks of farming, soldiery, legal advocacy, and maritime commerce. Hamman 1985 offers an overview of day-to-day life in North Africa.

[77] Cf. Butler 1990, 16-20, much of whose description of popular religious behavior in early modern Europe (9) could, with chronological, heresiological, and geographical data duly adjusted, apply verbatim to late antiquity.

Porphyry, Augustine prefaces an illustration from Vergil by saying "just about all of you know this ... but few of you know it from books, many from the theater."[78] Even an erudite sermon, delivered possibly at Hippo, possibly at Carthage (and, if so, in the most educated city in Africa), can be aimed at a mostly uneducated audience.[79]

In May 395, as well, the attendees at Augustine's sermons will probably not have been exclusively well-to-do, even if, quite likely, those confident enough in their persons and learning to argue with him were.[80] They probably will not have included all of the devout catholics of the city; the day before the sermon from April 418, Augustine had freely acknowledged the faithful Christianity of those who had missed a service during the festal season.[81] Nonetheless, assiduous church attendance, though not unambiguously the *sine qua non* of good Christianity, was still a sign of special piety, the kind of thing old "church-ladies" did.[82] We can infer differing degrees of devotion, therefore, or just of busyness. In the

[78] *Serm.* 241.5 (*PL* 38: 1135-36): *nostis enim hoc prope omnes ... sed pauci nostis in libris, multi in theatris*. For the date, Bochet 2009, 279-80.

[79] Bochet 279 n. 55, "Rien n'indique dans ces sermons qu'ils aient été prêchés à Carthage, même s'il est certain qu'ils seraient plus adaptés au public de Carthage." Cf. *Ep.* 118.9 (*CCSL* 31B: 117-18) for the superior learning of Carthage and, for a thorough account, Vössing 1997.

[80] Cf. Brown 2000, 192, on the interlocutors of *De div. daem*.

[81] *Serm.* 240.1 (*PL* 38: 1130-31): *sed scio fidem uestram, fidem huius totius multitudinis, et eorum qui hodie hic non sunt, et tamen fideles sunt*.

[82] For example, *Serm.* Denis 18.6 (=306B.6), where the dutiful Christian is mocked by others, apparently Christians, for going to church like the *uiduae et aniculae*; see further Rebillard 2012, 68.

most pious set rank, I have suggested, the attendees at the Wednesday service. But in fact, the bulk of any of the congregations of *Ep.* 29 is likely to have been made up of people who were, relative to the average inhabitant of Hippo, reasonably zealous for God and the martyrs. These are the ones who had heard about Augustine's preaching and cared enough to come to church to hear more, or had planned to honor Leontius and accepted Augustine's new way of doing so, grudgingly or freely. Others, including newcomers from the city's wide hinterland, might still have hoped to party: a mark of zeal, but not necessarily for the service, or the servants, of Christ.[83] A festival was, after all, a good time. As Augustine remarked in another sermon, it was not piety but the celebration, the *sollemnitas*—a word, quite unlike our "solemnity," applicable to raucous public entertainment—that drew in the kind of people who would otherwise go to the theater.[84] To come to church, absent such an event, was a mark of "greater devotion to the Scriptures."

Augustine's achievement, during that half-week in Hippo, was not, therefore, a general transformation in the lives of the catholic laity, let alone of the city's population as whole. He had, however, managed to correct to a more exacting standard the festivities that would otherwise have taken place, in his part of the divided Christian community, in Leontius' honor. In testifying to this episode in the history of martyr-veneration at Hippo, *Ep.* 29 thus allows unusually vivid insight into the actions and formation of the lay "primary

[83] The territory of Hippo extended perhaps as much as fifty kilometers inland: see Lancel 1984, esp. the rough map on 1098.

[84] *Serm.* 361.4 (*PL* 39: 1600). For the word in reference to public games, cf., e.g., Symm., *Rel.* 10.2**,** referring to the *sollemnes theatri uoluptates* (Seeck 1883: 288)

group" of the city's catholic church.[85] Augustine's letter illustrates the ways in which a self-selected community of the relatively, if not uniformly, devout could take up his message, and in which Augustine himself, by God's help (as he called events that might seem fortuitous), by his own planning, and by dialogue with his congregants, could use less well-attended services and longstanding holidays to generate interest in what he had to say. He was able, in short, to steer the people who did, in fact, show up to church away from practices that did not match what he and his fellow-clergy wished to see; and those congregants, even those initially resistant, might be won over to his way of doing things, at least for the time being.

The "good" Christians and their preacher

Every reader of Augustine knows that there were devout laypeople in ancient North Africa and Italy. His obituary for his mother Monica in *Confessions* would make that clear by itself, even if one overlooked the devout cook, tailor, minor landholders, and adjunct professor, or his generalized defenses of what Robert Markus called "mediocre" Christians.[86] Indeed, the Monica who hangs on Ambrose's sermons, "loves" him "like an angel of God," and abandons martyr-feasting at the behest of Ambrose's *ostiarius*, in order to partake of the Eucharist at the martyrs' shrines and "give what she could to the needy," is a neat model of the obedient, spiritual-minded behavior Augustine wanted to inculcate in May 395, a few

[85] For the application of the sociological term to late antiquity, see Brown 1998b, 654, who includes laity, but focuses mostly on ascetics.

[86] Monica: *Conf.* 9.8.17-9.22 (ed. Skutella, Teubner); tailor and cook: *Ciu.* 22.8 (*CCSL* 48: 821); *proscholus* (a kind of assistant to a *grammaticus*): *Serm.* 178.7.8 (*CCSL* 41Bb: 606-7); landholders: e.g., Publicola in *Ep.* 46-47 (*CCSL* 31: 198-211), Curma in *Cur.* 12.15 (*CSEL* 41: 644-57). "Christian mediocrity": Markus 1990, 45-62.

years before the writing of *Confessions*.[87] At least in recent historiography, however, the trend has been to emphasize the disconnect between the practices and beliefs of "ordinary" Christians and those the bishops were trying to promote. I do not suggest that the situation encapsulated in a single letter can be read into all of the sermons Augustine preached across a long career, and still less, into the sermons of other churchmen, who preached with differing talent to different audiences amid different cultural and social situations. Nonetheless, in offering a particularly fleshed-out picture of laity and preacher communicating and ultimately agreeing with one another, *Ep.* 29 is a check against this historiographical trend. There were Christian laypersons, both men and women, who sought to obey scripture and accepted their bishops' authority to explain it (a point well made, for late antique Gaul, by Lisa Kaaren Bailey).[88] Sermons did, sometimes, meet with more than just indifference or hostility, and "ordinary" Christians were not *ipso facto* undevout or dismissive of episcopal strictures.

Although there was in North Africa always a danger, so long as a rival episcopal hierarchy offered a viable alternative to "catholic" Christianity, that a congregant, once rebuked, might simply leave for a "Donatist" bishop's jurisdiction,[89] the picture matches what we find, for example, in a justly famous sermon preached, nine or ten years later, at Carthage.[90] On the fourth of "four straight days" of sermons on the Donatists, rowdiness and

[87] *Conf.* 6.1.1-2.2 (ed. Skutella, Teubner).

[88] Bailey 2017, 140, on laity in late antique Gaul; cf., for the rather different second-century context, Robinson 2017, 226 n. 3.

[89] Thus, *In Evang. Iohan.* 10.5 traces a progression of compounding sins: theft, astrological consultation to evade detection, "blasphemy" of the bishop when he forbids astrology, and, after excommunication, the declaration *Duco me ad partem Donati*.

[90] *Serm.* Dolbeau 2, published with comments in Dolbeau 1992a.

heckling led Augustine to stop preaching mid-sermon.[91] The next day, he chastised (at points, harangued) the congregation, rebuking their disobedience and appealing to his love for them and to their reputation as the province's leading city, before weaving back (as he usually does) to matters of theology and devotion. Despite the evident gap between the congregation's behavior and his wishes, he was still speaking to people who had chosen to come back to church and face what might prove a stinging rebuke from a visiting bishop they knew well. To hear a preacher out, and at least to consider his words, did matter to these Christians, even as it had mattered, in a situation similarly fraught, to the congregants of *Ep.* 29. One can thus go further, at least in Augustine's case, than reinforcement of the truism that some laity did, in fact, try to live up to episcopal standards. Vocal questioning of a preacher, which might look like hostility even to the preacher himself, could in fact reflect a desire to understand what Christian devotion required.

In a later sermon, Augustine would stress the danger that the "sedition of carnal persons" had posed to the church at Hippo in May 395.[92] In the letter, however, the *contradictores* are not just outspoken opponents of his new teaching and so the people he most wishes to win over, but also those most willing to hear his reasoning and explain their own. If those who met with him included men of prominence or ability (both are likely), Augustine's persuasion would have been of particular practical importance. Elsewhere, Augustine urges *patres familias* to use their good-will and authority to correct the errors, in belief and conduct, of their friends, wives, and slaves.[93] Once they had digested Augustine's

[91] *Serm.* Dolbeau 2.4 (ed. Dolbeau 1992a, 64-65).

[92] *Serm.* 252.4 (*PL* 38: 1174).

[93] *Ep.* 170.10 (*CSEL* 44: 630-31), writing with Alypius to urge a recent convert to catholic teaching to win over his household, *Tractatus in Iohannem* 10.9 (*CCSL* 36: 106), exhorting

teaching, therefore, his interlocutors would have helped to spread it to others from varied social strata, including, possibly, some who had not come to any of the services.[94]

That, at least, is the picture one gets from *Ep.* 29, with a little elaboration from Augustine's wider corpus. The question, then, is how widely the picture can be transferred into that corpus. To what degree are the patterns described in *Ep.* 29 representative of the many Augustinian sermons now fossilized in manuscript? One can find an array of parallels. First, there are signs of the congregation's fluctuating size and attention, and of the forces that drove the fluctuation. In some sermons, he credits the assembly of a larger audience to his previous preaching,[95] or to a special event such as the dedication of a new church building;[96] in others, he expresses surprise at a larger assembly than expected, for example in

men properly shocked at drunken martyr-feasting to "admonish" friends "gently," "rein in" their wives "most severely," and "check" slave-girls "even with blows." on martyr-cult. *Serm.* 94 (*PL* 38: 580-81) figures the duty as an *episcopatus* over each man's home. On the ideal of mingled "paternal severity" and love involved, see Shaw 1987, 17-18. Reality might well have seen the wife more devout, as in *Serm.* 9.3-4, 11-12 (*CCSL* 41: 109-16, 127-32), *Ep.* 2*.4 (*CSEL* 88: 11-12), and Augustine's own childhood home (*Conf.* 9.9.19-22, *CCSL* 27: 145-47), or Christians under pressure from pagan superiors (*Serm.* 62.7-16, *CCSL* 41Aa: 301-11; *Registri Ecclesiae Carthaginensis excerpta* 60, *CCSL* 149: 196-7).

[94] Cf. Robinson 2017, 232.

[95] *Tractatus in Iohannem* 12.1 (*CCSL* 36: 120), *Ex eo quod hesterno die intentam fecimus caritatem uestram, intellegimus uos alacrius et numerosius conuenisse*.

[96] *Serm.* 336.1 (*PL* 38: 1471).

cold weather or during a major civic festival.[97] Sometimes, he concedes that those who have come for a holiday do not, in fact, want to hear too much preaching; those who come to church after a holiday are, therefore, the ones who really want to listen.[98] Such remarks are not always unsympathetic: in one of the *Tractates* on John, he cuts a sermon off, with an eye to the *fastidiosi*, but invites the *studiosi* back to hear more.[99] Elsewhere, he complains bitterly of churches stuffed on churchly holidays and theaters stuffed on civic holidays, each time by the same crowds of lukewarm Christians.[100] Varying attendance is a natural occurrence, therefore, and, though both his own actions and the church year can inspire more people to attend, he must, and does, work with what he has. Some people, however, were definitely there to hear the sermon, and Augustine could go on at length, if his announcement of the conclusion aroused calls for more.[101]

There are also traces of communication between preacher and listeners across time. Thus, Augustine will remind his listeners of impending holidays or invite them back to church for the next sermon in a sequence, even declaring what his topic will be, so that he can

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[97] *Tractatus in Iohannem* 6.1; cf. 7.1 (*CCSL* 36: 53, 67); *Serm.* Dolbeau 26.1 (ed. Dolbeau 1992b: 90).

[98] *Serm.* 51.1 (*CCSL* 41Aa: 9-10).

[99] *Tractatus in Iohannem* 8.13 (*CCSL* 36: 90).

[100] *Enarr. in Psalm.* 30/2.2.2 (*CSEL* 93/1B: 168), *Serm.* Denis 17.7-9 (ed. Morin 1930: 87-89), *Serm.* 361.4 (*PL* 39: 1600), discussed above.

[101] *Enarr. in Psalm.* 147.21-28 (*CCSL* 40: 2157-2165), going on for about nine more pages after saying *finiemus Psalmum*, acknowledging their fatigue, and yielding to the *studia multorum exigentium de me hunc laborem et hunc sudorem*. Cf. *Enarr. in Psalm* 38.23 (*CCSL* 38: 422).

(as he puts it in one of the *Enarrationes*) "be helped by your zealous faith and your prayers."[102] Likewise, he encourages particular devotional responses to his sermon or the surrounding situation, especially prayer, often for those absent from the church.[103] Some instructions are more extraordinary. One of the *Enarrationes*, for example, closes with an appeal for watchful support of a repentant ex-astrologer so prying, to modern eyes, that it led one scholar to propose, in desperation, that Augustine meant himself.[104] In fact, Augustine is clearly talking about an already baptized member of his congregation who has just come clean, not about his own youthful experiments in fortune-telling.[105] His exhortation is an unusual, targeted example of his more general appeals for the laity to participate in one another's moral correction.

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[102] Holidays: e.g., *Serm.* Morin 1.3 (ed. Morin 1930: 593). Future sermon topics: *Enarr. in Psalm.* 123.14 (*CSEL* 95/3: 145), *Crastino etiam die sermonem deberi caritati uestrae optime nostis. Adestote, et adiuuate nos orationibus uestris. Pollicitationis enim nostrae meminisse debetis, nec dicerem quid essem tractaturus, nisi adiuuari uolens studio fidei et orationum uestrarum.* Cf. *Enarr. in Psalm.* 126.13 (*CSEL* 95/3: 206).

[103] *Tractatus in Iohannem* 7.24 (*CCSL* 36: 81), *Serm.* Dolbeau 22.26 (ed. Dolbeau 1994: 196), *Enarr. in Psalm.* 50.1 (*CCSL* 38: 599-600), 147.7 (*CSEL* 95/5: 205). *Tractatus in Iohannem* 13.18 (*CCSL* 36: 140-41) expresses a similar desire for prayer, now apparently for the Donatists.

[104] *Enarr. in Psalm.* 61.23 (*CCSL* 38: 792-93), with Ferrari 1978. The argument is allowed, uncritically, by O'Loughlin 1999, 102, n. 90.

[105] *Conf.* 7.6.8-7.11 (ed. Skutella, Teubner).

The conclusion to one of the *Tractates* on John offers a very different, but equally striking, episcopal intervention: a theological problem for the listeners to debate in advance of the next sermon.[106]

> Question peacefully, without strife, without quarrelling, without altercations, without enmities. Ask amongst yourselves, and question others, and say, 'Our bishop laid out this question for us today, with the aim, if God grants, of answering it himself.' ... Chew on this amongst yourselves in the meantime, confer on this amongst yourselves, comment on this amongst yourselves.

"Comment on this amongst yourselves" (*hanc uobiscum tractate*): Augustine is assimilating his congregation's teasing apart of the matter to his own homiletic effort.[107] It is a fitting place to conclude, before a retrospective coda. Though I have not tried to assemble every scrap of information about Augustine's rapport with his audience,[108] these are enough to say that at least some of Augustine's sermons were meant to be taken up into the thinking and prayers of his congregants, and even into the outside debate exemplified by *Ep.* 29. Such sermons, and perhaps others, are not just witnesses to the now-lost oral culture of Christian learning and spirituality that historians and theologians have begun to tease out.[109] They were

[106] *Tractatus in Iohannem* 4.16 (*CCSL* 36: 39-40).

[107] For preaching, in each case by *lectio continua*, as *tractare*, see *Tractatus in Iohannem* 11.1 (CCSL 36: 109), *Enarr. in Psalm*. 118.6.1 (*CSEL* 95/2: 88).

[108] See Olivar 1991, 641-889, for a survey from several different ancient preachers, Augustine not least.

[109] Orality in Augustine's sermons: Rosenberg 2012 and the wide-ranging reflections by Harrison 2013.

contributions to a living conversation—in fact, a multitude of individual debates and discussions—in which Augustine was a primary, though not an all-dominating, speaker.[110]

Coda: Thirty years later

By an exquisite coincidence, one of the few homiletic episodes, recorded from Augustine's long career, that can rival *Ep.* 29 for vividness of detail also has to do with the martyrs. The year is often given as 426;[111] 425 was preferred by the early modern experts, and in fact we do not know for certain.[112] To put, in brief, a sequence of events narrated in a series of extant sermons and again, with more context, in the last book of *City of God*: Paul and Palladia were a young brother and sister from Cappadocia, who had, along with their five elder siblings, been afflicted by a neurological or psychological disorder (as we would call it), after a bitter family quarrel had seen their mother curse them all.[113] They had gone to many holy sites, not least Ancona, with its shrine of St. Stephen, and then Uzalis, the first city in Africa to take up his veneration.[114] Led on by repeated visions of Augustine, they had come to Hippo, two weeks before Easter, where they anticipated the healing promised in an initial vision.[115] The

[110] As Clark 2008, 134, says, Augustine conducted his "public exegesis ... in dialogue with a mixed community of Christians"; cf. Rebillard 1997, 96.

[111] E.g., Leyser 2005, Perler 1955, 321; 425/426: Saxer 1980, 257.

[112] 425: the Maurists, reprinted in *PL* 768, n. a, and, more copious and careful, Tillemont 1710, 1003-4. See n. 116, below.

[113] The sermons are *Serm.* 320-24 (*PL* 1442-47). For the background, see *Serm.* 322 (*PL* 38: 1443-45), *Civ. dei* 22.8 (*CCSL* 48: 825-27).

[114] On Stephen's veneration in Africa, see Saxer 1980, 245-79.

[115] *Serm.* 322 (*PL* 38: 1443-45).

intervening days they had spent praying in the shrine that had been built at Hippo, by the benefaction of the deacon Eraclius, Augustine's future successor, a year or two before.[116]

On Easter itself, Augustine was about to get up and process into the church, when "one person after another" burst in with the news: Paul had collapsed in the middle of his prayers and, when he recovered from the faint, was fully healed.[117] Augustine entered, to find a joyful commotion in a church filled for the Easter holiday, where uproarious cries of "Thanks be to God! Praises to God!" echoed from all sides. "I greeted the people," he recounted later, "and again they shouted the same things yet-more fervently." It is no wonder, after the excitement, that a man so old as Augustine begged off preaching for fatigue. Instead, after the Scriptures were read, he pointed to Paul's face as a testimony of the martyr's power equal to any written account (*libellus*).[118] The next day's brief address stoked anticipation further, promising a proper, written *libellus* on the morrow.[119] On Easter Tuesday, the *libellus* was read out, with Paul and Palladia standing on the steps of the *exedra*, below Augustine's place. He then dismissed the siblings, and began to preach. When Augustine was a few

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[116] Augustine says, earlier in *Civ. dei* 22.8 (*CCSL* 48: 824), that the *memoria* of Stephen had been in place "not yet two years" (*nondum est autem biennium*) at Hippo. When that book was completed is not known for certain; 426–427 is only a plausible guess (O'Daly 1999, 35, 279-80, who shrewdly sidesteps this incident). Eraclius' building of a *memoria* is mentioned in the Epiphany *Serm.* 356.7 (ed. Lambot 1950: 136); this is universally assumed to be Stephen's shrine, but Augustine does not actually say so outright, nor how long it had been standing.

[117] *Civ. dei* 22.8 (*CCSL* 48: 825-26).

[118] *Serm.* 320 (*PL* 38: 1442).

[119] *Serm.* 321 (*PL* 38: 1443).

paragraphs into his sermon, he was interrupted by cries of joy out of the martyr's shrine: Palladia, too, had been healed, in much the same way.[120] Here, the interruption is recorded within the manuscript text of the sermon itself, and, when the joyful worshippers brought Palladia back into the nave, Augustine abruptly finished the sermon with his own thanks to God.[121] The Wednesday service, accordingly, featured a brief sermon that finished the previous day's account of yet another of Stephen's miracles, at Uzalis.[122]

This episode, for which, so unusually, we do have the original homiletic data, offers the capstone for the long sequence of present-day miracles, many but not all credited to Stephen, that are recounted in *City of God* 22.8. These, Augustine says, were a selection not just of experiences known to him personally, such as the sudden healing of a devout woman, Innocentia, from her breast cancer, but from among some seventy written testimonies of Stephen's miracles that he had received in the preceding years. These *libelli* were meant to be read out in church, in the way Paul's had been that Easter Tuesday,[123] and both reflect and drove the new openness toward modern miracles exemplified in the last book of *City of God*.[124] They also offer a neatly inverted parallel with which to bracket the evidence, from the beginning of Augustine's churchly career, of *Ep.* 29. Augustine's sermons, as exemplified in that letter, shaped the thinking and the conversation of devout ordinary Christians. Near the

[120] *Serm.* 322-23 (*PL* 38: 1443-46), *Civ. dei* 22.8 (*CCSL* 48: 826-27).

[121] *Serm.* 323.4 (*PL* 38: 1446). For the architectural features implied in the account, see Perler 1955, 321-26, Marec 1958, 232-4.

[122] *Serm.* 324 (*PL* 38: 1446-47).

[123] See Delehaye 1910 and now Duval 2006.

[124] van Bavel 1996, 360, "Augustine admitted for the first time that also in Africa in his day miracles were happening"; cf. Saxer 1980, 274-75.

end of his life, their experiences—the "tumult," as he calls it, of a very different "*laetitia*"—shaped in turn both his preaching on the martyrs, most dramatically in the days surrounding the healing of Paul and Palladia, and the concluding book of the work that would, more than any other, define for posterity his understanding of the Church, God, and human life.[125]

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[125] *Subito laetitiae tumultus exortus est*: *Serm.* 324 (*PL* 38: 1447).

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