

**Domesticating suffering in North Africa:  
Augustine and the preaching of the Psalms  
on the feast days of the martyrs<sup>1</sup>**

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*Abstract*

This article examines why Augustine cleansed his sermons on the Psalms on the feast days of the martyrs of graphic and vivid descriptions of suffering found in earlier martyr narratives, and looks at what replaced them. It is argued that Augustine “domesticates” suffering, and reconstructs the martyr narratives for a post-martyrdom Catholic Church, especially in response to dominant discourses active in the rival Donatist movement, which had effectively monopolised physical suffering. He does this via four discourses: a) The continuity of physical suffering from the early martyrs to the current Donatist martyrs present in the martyrologies assumes a claim on genealogy, which Augustine has to counter; b) There is a focus on the physical body of the martyr, with prurient and erotic detail in Donatist martyr stories, while Augustine proposes a new scopic economy, equally yet differently erotic, of “spiritual seeing”; c) The sacrifice of the martyr as atonement for sins stands out as a main point of difference between the Donatists and Augustine, and so Augustine develops one of the earliest psychotheologies of suicide; and d) Augustine provides a counter-discourse to a claim to mnemonic spatiality which provides the Donatists with healing and a sense of belonging and, most importantly, signifies a stance of purity over and against the Catholics. Finally, this article asks what the psychagogical effect of this domestication was on the everyday life of the Catholic Christians.

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**A presence of absence**

In late antiquity, there is one distinction, possibly above all others, that separates North African Christian piety from its Italian counterpart: the preferential option for martyrdom above virginity. This is eloquently demonstrated by Peter Brown (1988:397):

Many African martyrs were known to have been married women and mothers of children, as were Perpetua and St. Crispina of Theveste. At a time when Jerome could state that even the blood of martyrdom was barely able to wipe away ‘the dirt of marriage’ from a Christian woman, and when Italian writers found it difficult to imagine female martyrs other than as young virgins, intent, above all, on preserving their integrity, Augustine wrote to African nuns, warning them never to look down on married women.

Now enter Augustine. The discourse of martyrdom in North Africa in the early fifth century is most appropriately represented by the bishop of Hippo. As both an exemplum of Catholicism in the vicinity and a rhetorical “hero” in the heyday of Christian philosophical preaching, over and against a potent and influential “sect” called Donatism,<sup>2</sup> Augustine constantly found himself in a tug-of-war to claim Christian martyrs as cultural capital for the dominant hegemony.<sup>3</sup> Martyrdom, as a discourse, is rampant in Augustine’s writings, and this, in turn, was crucial to the formation and maintenance of the cult of the martyrs in North Africa – an important identity marker of North African Christianity in general (cf. Saxer 1980:124-254; Brown 1981:26-40). The dynamics of this cult were especially visible in the many feasts held *in memoriam* of the martyrs of old. Augustine actively partook of these feasts and, as Saxer (1980:141-49) notes, had an influential role in shaping the

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<sup>2</sup> It needs to be noted in this instance that both Augustine’s ‘orthodoxy’ and the Donatists referred to themselves as ‘Catholics’, as Shaw (1992:4-34) has correctly demonstrated. While noting this problematic nomenclature, this article will refer to Augustine’s group as ‘Catholics’ and the Donatists as such simply for convenience (or as Shaw would say, laziness) of expression and discernment.

<sup>3</sup> I use the terms ‘cultural capital’ and ‘hegemony’ in this article as concepts rooted in cultural historiography, specifically for the former, in the Bourdieuan sense (thus, a corollary of symbolic capital *vis-à-vis* economic capital), and the latter, in the Foucaultian sense (in which power is seen as a complex flow between different social groups, and not merely viewed as one-dimensional binarism). The article as a whole is more inclined to a Foucaultian methodology (cf. Foucault 1972:31-39; 1980:198-200; see also: Veyne 2010:5-15), and the reader may read ‘author’ or ‘voice’ in the stead of Bourdieu’s cultural capital if a methodological purism is preferred (cf. Bourdieu 1977:171-82; 1993:74-144; see also: Swartz 1998:42-44, 65-68; Webb, Schirato & Danaher 2002:20-24, 109-12; Brubaker 2005:25-64).

*mores* around the feasts. This took place especially via the method of philosophical and expository preaching. Preaching was at the core of the Christianisation of daily life in general in the context of late antiquity.<sup>4</sup> This article, then, is particularly concerned with a specific grouping of such sermons which seems to feature prominently during the feasts of the martyrs — namely Augustine’s sermons or, rather, “enarrations” on the Psalms. La Bonnardière, in her seminal article on this very topic, “*Les Enarrationes in Psalmos Præchées par Saint Augustin à l’Occasion de Fêtes de Martyrs*” (1971:73-103),<sup>5</sup> has singled out seventeen expositions devoted to these occasions.<sup>6</sup> However, when one reads these expositions devoted to the martyrs, one is struck, in the words of Hadewijch of Antwerp, by a “presence of absence”. We may ask: absence of what? The presence of the shamed, mutilated and suffering bodies of the martyrs is what is absent. Gone are those naked, raked, burned, flayed and crushed bodies so pruriently present in the pornographic *imaginaire* of earlier martyrologies.<sup>7</sup> The titillating sado-eroticism of these antique martyr narratives is now replaced with a spiritualised, domesticated form of suffering. I use the term “domestication” in the sense of the *domus* of everyday life, in which a strict spiritual economy was present by means of spiritual exercises and disciplines.

This article asks why Augustine has cleansed his sermons on the Psalms on the feast days of the martyrs of such graphic and vivid descriptions of suffering, and examines what replaces them. Augustine “domesticates” suffering, and reconstructs the martyr narratives for a post-martyrdom Catholic Church, especially in response to dominant discourses active in the rival Donatist movement, which had effectively monopolised physical suffering. Finally, the article asks what the psychagogical effect of this domestication was on the everyday life of the Catholic Christians.

### **The Donatists and the monopolisation of physical suffering**

On 15 August 347 AD, two men named Maximian and Isaac were tortured and killed by Catholic imperial soldiers for belonging to the Donatists and

<sup>4</sup> Maxwell (2006:144-68) has demonstrated this phenomenon quite convincingly in the context of John Chrysostom at Antioch. The same would certainly apply for Augustine.

<sup>5</sup> The thesis of Gabarino (2007) is also of importance.

<sup>6</sup> *Enarrat. Ps* 32.II.2, 9; 36.16; 40.1; 63.1; 69.1, 4, 9; 85.24; 88.I.10, 27, II.11, 14; 102.3; 120.1, 13, 15; 127.2, 6; 137.3, 7, 14, 17; 140.1; 141.1; 144.17; cf. La Bonnardière (1971:73-103). It must be noted that Augustine’s numerical listing of the Psalms follows the order of the LXX, and this article will also assume the LXX order when referring to the Psalms.

<sup>7</sup> Illustrating the immense relevance of this issue, numerous studies have demonstrated the socio-cultural and psycho-sexual implications of these martyrologies in the context of early Christianity and late antiquity: cf. Saxer (1971); Brown (1988:65-82); Perkins (1995); Shaw (1996:269-312); Clark (1998:99-115); Vorster (2003:66-99); Castelli (2004); Grig (2004); Constantinou (2005); Burrus (2008); Frankfurter (2009:215-45); Miller (2009); Glancy (2010); Engberg, Eriksen & Petersen (2011).

opposing Catholic rule. The account of the martyrdom, the *Passio Maximiani et Isaac*, traditionally attributed to the Donatist bishop Macrobius, speaks of these Catholic Christian soldiers as being “butchers” and “soldiers of the devil” (Tilley 1996:66-67):

Thus a war was waged between his [Maximian’s] body and the torturers, between sacrilegious people and a devout man, between strength of soul and butchers, between a soldier of Christ and soldiers of the devil, between an enduring person and his judge. One miserable man was enough to fight so gloriously, against so much torture and against such a multitude of the enemy that in this one contest, the enemy could not report a single victory ... These very servants of sacrilege hardly had their fill with one victim before handing over another [Isaac] to be sacrificed at their hands in the same way so that they might openly surpass the standards of their ancestors.

With this struggle between the Donatists and the Catholics in mind, I propose that Donatist rhetoric monopolised suffering, and thereby power,<sup>8</sup> by means of four discourses: a) genealogy; b) prurience; c) sacrifice; and d) mnemonic spatiality. I use the term “rhetoric” to specifically denote the discursivity of these discourses as products of language.<sup>9</sup> This is crucial, since the realm of popular opinion was, according to Shaw (1992:4-10), the battlefield for the bishops of both sides. After this section, I will attempt to demonstrate how Augustine reclaims suffering for the Catholics by reacting to these four discourses, specifically in his expositions of the Psalms preached on the feast days of the martyrs.

The first discourse at work is that of genealogy. This martyr narrative, along with many other Donatist martyr stories, served an important genealogical function within the movement. Both Nietzsche and Foucault emphasised that arguments based on genealogy are inevitably linked to power, and especially violence (cf. Foucault 1971:351-69). If a movement could successfully demonstrate its *Ursprung* from some authentic point of stability, it became a powerful marker of identity and authority and, most importantly, permitted discernment from possible charlatan groups (Foucault 1971:351-54). As seen from the narrative quoted above, the Donatist martyrs surpassed the standards of their ancestors. As martyrs like Perpetua and Cyprian have suffered and achieved victory, so too these martyrs have triumphed. In a

<sup>8</sup> See especially the article by Shaw (1996:269-312).

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion on the discourse of language and discursive formations, cf. Foucault (1972:31-40, 215-38).

sermon on the martyrdom of Donatus and Advocatus,<sup>10</sup> an even more effective genealogical strategy is present. The author states: “No one else appears as servant of Christ the Lord as much as someone who suffered the same things as the Lord.” It says: “No servant is greater than his master; if they persecute me, they will persecute you [John 15:20]” (Tilley 1996:57). Here the martyr is genealogically linked to Christ by means of physical, bodily suffering. This affirms the authenticity of the group. Moreover, the problem inferred from genealogy is the problem of naming. Shaw has already illustrated how problematic the process of naming becomes, even for the modern scholar (Shaw 1992:4-10). Inevitably, the Donatist martyr narratives attest to this problem. The author of the sermon quoted above also states: “Those people who were already fawning on him [Christ] and were deserted by God came to be known as ‘Catholics’. By prejudice in favour of the name, those who refused to communicate with them were called ‘heretics’” (Tilley 1996:54-55). He continues to state that the Catholic Christians were especially guilty of mingling with “lascivious youths” and “despicable women” (Tilley 1996:55). They were not able to achieve the virtue of self-mastery. They could never be called Christians. The name ‘Christian’ implies genealogical heritage from Christ.

The second discourse at work is the discourse of prurience.<sup>11</sup> The author of the passion of Donatus and Advocatus makes a point of emphasising the gender of the martyrs. Near the end of the drama, it reads: “The bodies of both sexes were touching each other, lying there as would not have otherwise been fitting” (Tilley 1996:59). The sensuous death of the martyrs overrides the pollution caused by touch (Carson 1999:77-100) – the erotically intertwined bodies are voyeuristically put on display, with no shame.<sup>12</sup> In the sado-erotic sexualisation of the martyrology,<sup>13</sup> in the words of Frankfurter (2009:217), “arousal itself is mixed – indeed, *safely* [his italics] mixed – with horror, outrage or disgust”. In almost pornographic terms, the foreplay of the spectacle is described: “The sword of the tribune had not yet pierced through the honoured throat of the holy bishop of Siciliba, but it pricked him and the rage of the devil revealed who his agents were” (Tilley 1996:55). The erotic tease has certain nuance in the Latin, in which, according to Shaw (1996:274), the word for sword (*gladius*) was very often equated with the penis (cf. Adams 1982:20-21). A similar pornography of power is highlighted in his discussion of the fictional heroine and martyr Leukippê, where the

<sup>10</sup> Although the title of this sermon refers to Donatus and Advocatus, there is no proof in its contents that it refers to them; cf. Tilley (1996:51-53).

<sup>11</sup> For prurience in late antiquity, cf. Castelli (1995:1-20); Shaw (1996:269-312); Frankfurter (2009:215-45).

<sup>12</sup> For an excellent discussion of the ‘shamelessness’ of martyr accounts, cf. Burrus (2008:10-43).

<sup>13</sup> I utilise the vocabulary of prurience found in Caviness (2001:83-85) and Frankfurter (2009:217); for a more general discussion, cf. Goldhill (2001:154-94).

torturer's sword also simply grazes her throat (Shaw 1996:273-74; cf. Loraux 1987; Hanson 1990:309-38). By some creative gender-bending (cf. Castelli 2004:125-26), the feminine language used in the martyrdom of the bishop of Siciliba is not covert – the throat is often called “the other mouth” and the “quintessential female part”, and its exposure implies passivity and vulnerability (Hanson 1990:309-21). In contrast to this, the active and dominating role of the executor is related to penetration, a typical masculine characteristic (Parker 1997:47-65). The pornographic suffering of the Donatist martyrs excites fantasy and the prurient gaze, and its most important feature is its embodiment. It is the actual bodies that are erotically broken and penetrated. This would be the main difference compared with Augustine, who would focus on the impenetrability of the soul, which will be shown in the next section. The Donatists had a monopoly over physical suffering in North Africa during Augustine's time. Knowing how potent a message the bare, broken, beaten and bloody body of the martyr communicates, the Donatists thereby defy Catholic and state authority. The endurance of sado-erotic pain and torture is used as an empowering technology. It serves to display not the power of the Catholic state, but the power of the Donatist community. Power, in fact, lies in passivity – core values of femininity in antiquity. It also serves the important function of invective against their persecutors, who are in actual fact the weak ones. Through suffering, power is gained by the sufferer, and the Catholic soldiers are instantly turned into the savage, barbaric other. The prurient spectacle of the suffering Donatist serves to ramify social boundaries.

The third discourse involves sacrifice. This would become a crucial point of difference and debate between Augustine and the Donatists. The Donatists have the upper hand in that they are able to sacrifice their bodies, physically, for Christ. They are portrayed as the victims of violence (Gaddis 2005:103-30). It should be remembered, however, that the Donatists, especially also the Circumcellions, were also guilty of very violent attacks and abductions against the clergy – Augustine himself almost a victim at one point (Bowersock, Brown & Grabar 1999:378). The difference lies in the public representation of violence as punishment. The violence on the part of the Catholics is systemic, and portrayed as punitive, but also invalid since the martyrs are innocent. The end result of the violence is to produce docile Catholic bodies,<sup>14</sup> an end being resisted by the Donatist *voluntarily*. Augustine would later accuse the Donatists of suicide, which they seem to confuse with voluntary martyrdom. The Donatists' emphasis on sacrifice also seems to relate to atonement, a thought proposed by another North African theologian, Tertullian,<sup>15</sup> centuries earlier. An example of this is found in the *Acta*

<sup>14</sup> For the relationship between the violence and punishment, and the production of docile bodies, cf. Foucault (1977:3-31, 135-55).

<sup>15</sup> Tertullian, *Apol.* 50.15-16; cf. Gabarino (2007:17).

*Felicis* and the *Passio Felicis*, in which the martyr Felix is likened to a lamb before the sacrifice (Tilley 1996:8). The *Passio Marculi* also attests to this: “So the pure one [Marculus] approached to place the sacrifice on the altar of Christ, that he himself would merit to become a sacrifice for Christ” (Gabarino 2007:19). Augustine would rather have an emphasis on testimony and cause of suffering than sacrifice.

Finally, the discourse of mnemonic spatiality also merits discussion. Mnemonic spatiality refers to the memory function of physical spaces. In the martyrdom of Donatus and Advocatus, the end of the execution is described as follows (Tilley 1996:57):

Everyone kept their eyes shut tight while each age group and sex was killed, cut down in the midst of the basilica. It is this very basilica, I say, between whose walls so many bodies were cut down and buried. Here, in the inscriptions, memory preserves the name of the persecution ...

The importance of these physical monuments of memory is displayed in the wars for church buildings and land between Catholics and Donatists in North Africa. After taking over a building, the Donatists performed many cleansing rituals like whitewashing the walls, sprinkling holy water and scraping the altars to rid the space of the pollution caused by the Catholics (Bowersock, Brown & Grabar 1999:378). In his study of the Fang hut (*nda-kisin/aba*) and the Zulu hut (*indlu*), the anthropologist James Fernandez has shown how the architectonics in which spatial symbols are set affect a healing power by means of association to antecedent experiences and beliefs (Fernandez 2003:201). The same spatial dynamic is active in this instance. The mnemonic spatiality serves in the interests of healing and group cohesion, and to discern group boundaries and traits of the other. The Donatists viewed themselves as the new Israel, and the Catholics and other non-Christians were seen as the godless defiled nations surrounding them (Tilley 1997:21-35).

These four intersections illustrate the typical Donatist traits in understanding martyrdom. The continuity of physical suffering from the early martyrs to the current Donatist martyrs present in the martyrologies assumes a claim on genealogy. There is also focus on the physical body of the martyr, with prurient and erotic detail. The sacrifice of the martyr as atonement for sins stands out as a major point of difference with Augustine and, finally, a claim to mnemonic spatiality provides the Donatists with healing and a sense of belonging and, most importantly, signifies a stance of purity over and against the Catholics.

**Augustine, the Psalms and the domestication of suffering**

The problem Augustine faced is that his sector of Christianity, the orthodox stream, no longer had martyrs. Augustine needed to reclaim martyrdom and re-imagine suffering in order to remain relevant to the North African Christian populace. We find the four discourses mentioned above in the Donatist martyrologies are also present with Augustine, but with distinct differences. His preference of preaching from the Psalms on these days bears great significance. By the time of Augustine, the Psalms had already become central in popular practices of spirituality and liturgy, and a very sophisticated hermeneutic had already been developed in approaching the Psalms.<sup>16</sup> By viewing and interpreting martyrdom through the lens of the Psalms, what I call a catalytic exegesis of martyrdom, Augustine is able to keep his expositions highly Christocentric and very moral (cf. Cameron 1999:73-103; Le Roux 2003:625-26). Which alternatives or amendments does Augustine provide, via the Psalms, to the above discourses so present in Donatist martyrologies? I am not implying that Augustine is directly opposing Donatism in every sermon. He is, however, busy reconstructing martyrdom (cf. Grig 2004; Gabarino 2007:1-20), and thereby the concept of suffering,<sup>17</sup> in the context of a post-martyrdom society, as Saxer (1980:123) states:

*Entre Cyprien et Augustin, il y a un siècle et demi de changements décisifs dans l'évolution du christianisme. L'ère des persécutions est finie, le nombre des martyrs est clos. L'empereur est chrétien; les païens, moins nombreux. L'Église d'Afrique est divisée entre catholiques et donatistes.*

The new era of change for the Catholic Church is seen especially in the end of martyrdom. Augustine, however, masterfully re-imagines and, as I argue, domesticates martyrdom and suffering in the midst of these drastic changes and divisions.

<sup>16</sup> For Augustine's biblical hermeneutics and exegesis, cf. Bonner (1970:541-62); La Bonnardière (1999:245-51); Le Roux (2003:624-33; 2004:123-30); Gillingham (2008:38-39). Many of the Psalms that Augustine preaches from on the martyrs' feast days were sung before the sermon started, see: *Enarrat. Ps.* 69.1; 127.1; 137.1; 140.1; 141.1. Gabarino (2007:59) lists a very interesting occurrence during the celebration of the martyrdoms of Paul and Peter, in which Augustine refers to Psalm 19:4 (*Serm.* 299A.9), and adds a polemical note: 'I imagine that they [the non-Catholics] too are celebrating this birthday of the apostles today; they pretend, indeed, to celebrate this day, but they certainly dare not sing this psalm.' (*Puto quia et ipsi hodie celebrant natalem apostolorum; adfectant quidem istum diem celebrare, sed non audent istum psalmum cantare.*)

<sup>17</sup> For commentary on the 'inner life of Augustine', cf. Misch (1951:17); Perkins (1995:143).

### Against literate animals

Rather than a focus on genealogy, Augustine's exegesis of the Psalms has been labelled prosopological exegesis (cf. Cameron 1999:86-87), in which "the psalmist prophetically but actually spoke the words of the mediator" (Gillingham 2008:39). From this trajectory, Augustine implies that since Christ and the church are one, the Psalms can only speak of Christ and/or the church (Gillingham 2008:38-39). This is a very effective rhetorical strategy in that it makes the hearers part of the psalm, and thus its application very practical. Another implication is that this form of exegesis makes it possible to link the audience with the actual martyrs, without bloodshed. The focus of suffering now shifts from physical torture in the arena to the sufferings of everyday life, especially spiritual suffering in the denial of earthly pleasures. This suffering must result in praise, as Augustine states:

Think how Crispina rejoiced ... she rejoiced when arrested, rejoiced when hailed before the judge, rejoiced when thrown into prison, rejoiced when hoisted onto the scaffold, rejoiced when the people listened to what she had to say, and rejoiced on being condemned.<sup>18</sup>

This praise must spill out into everyday life.<sup>19</sup> He said the same of Felix in his exposition of Psalm 127.<sup>20</sup> Since the martyrs rejoiced, the audience members must also rejoice. The suffering of the martyrs, through prosopological exegesis, becomes extratemporaneously contagious – only the cause of the suffering is different, but the symptoms must remain the same. This is the closest Augustine could get to the shattered bodies of the martyrs, without his or his audience's own bodies being shattered. Unlike the Donatist martyrs, the Catholic Christians now also become 'martyrs', but only from the safe distance of the arena or the scaffold. Suffering is therefore redefined from physical to spiritual suffering. Augustine formulates an interesting concept of the left and right hand of God, based on his interpretation of Psalm 137:7b: "You have stretched out your hand, and that is worse than the anger of my enemies; your right hand has saved me."<sup>21</sup> Salvation from God's left hand implies saving the body, but salvation by the right hand implies salvation of

<sup>18</sup> *Enarrat. Ps. 137.3: Quomodo gaudebat sancta ista Crispina cuius hodie solemnitas celebratur? Gaudebat cum tenebatur, cum ad iudicem ducebatur, cum in carcerem mittebatur, cum ligata producebatur, cum in catasta levabatur, cum audiebatur, cum damnabatur;* (PL 36; Online version: accessed 02/08/2011, 21:25PM; URL: [http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL\\_Augustine/esposizioni\\_salmi/index2.htm](http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL_Augustine/esposizioni_salmi/index2.htm)); translation: Boulding (2004:243).

<sup>19</sup> See *Enarrat. Ps. 32.2.8-10; 40.1; 69.1. 4, 9; 88.1.10, 27; 102.3; 141.1; 144.17.*

<sup>20</sup> *Enarrat. Ps. 127.2, 6; cf. Boulding (2004:102).*

<sup>21</sup> *Enarrat. Ps. 137.14; cf. Boulding (2004:252-53).*

the soul. The emphasis is on the suffering of the soul, since it is unified with Christ and should be spared from earthly temptations. The mind and soul are then one with Christ. In this new psychochristology, Augustine states that the greatest danger in reading the Psalms is to read them like carnally minded people. The phrase for such people is *homines animales*, people who read “like animals” (*animaliter*), only interested in the material aspects. In Augustine’s vocabulary, the opposite of *animaliter* is *spiritualiter* (Lewis 1879:122). Augustine’s reading of the Psalms is therefore characterised by a tension between the carnal and spiritual, and as Burrus, Jordan and MacKendrick state (2010:127):

Both Augustine’s seduction and his seductiveness require these tensions, by which he leads some of us more to one side, some more to another, but all of us, he hopes, however deviant our paths, to God - that is, to a joy without end or reservation, traced and resisted in the ever-tempting flesh, drawing our voices into a multiple and sometimes dissonant chorus of praise.

It is to this carnality that I now turn and explore Augustine’s prurience in contrast to that of the Donatists.

### **Taming the gaze**

The Donatists may have the upper hand in being able to display the public and physical suffering of their martyrs in prurient terms, but this does not mean that Augustine hesitated in including sexual innuendo in his sermons. There is also an element of prurience and sexuality in Augustine’s expositions of the Psalms, and within his exegesis in general (cf. Soble 2002:545-69; Burrus 2004:4-6; Burrus, Jordan & MacKendrick 2010). Augustine does not eliminate the prurient gaze in his expositions, but rather diverts the eyes of the audience and proposes a new scopical economy. It is still based on his distinction between the carnally and spiritually minded people mentioned above. In her excellent study of early Christian martyrdom, Castelli (2004:105, 124-25) has argued that Augustine proposed to Christians a new way of *looking*, when *hearing* the stories of the martyrs. He knew that the prurient stories of the martyrs would ignite a process of pornographic visualisation, which was unhealthy for his audience. Augustine proposes (in Castelli 2004:125):

They [the ungodly] saw with eyes of flesh sights with which to glut the monstrous inhumanity of their hearts; we behold with eyes of the heart sights which they were not permitted to see.

They rejoiced over the martyrs' dead bodies, we grieve over their dead minds.

Castelli (2004:125) calls this the "reframing of the dynamics of spectacle". In one sermon Augustine quotes Psalm 2:1, 4: "... the nations were roaring ... and peoples meditated vain things. But the one who dwells in the heavens was laughing at them, and the Lord was mocking them" (Castelli 2004:124). In this exposition, Augustine shows that the spectators of the martyrdoms were actually a spectacle before heaven, a spectacle before the divine gaze; thus the need for a new scopic economy.

This new scopic economy draws the focus to Christ and the church. I now focus specifically on Augustine's exposition of Psalm 127, preached on the feast day of the martyr Felix.<sup>22</sup> My reading of Augustine (and, inevitably, the Psalm) is influenced by Roland Barthes' notion of *Le Plaisir du Texte* (1973:217-64) and Margaret Miles' reading of Augustine's *Confessiones* as a "text of pleasure" (1992).<sup>23</sup> Even within his exegesis, subtle erotica is present. The Psalm is described as a wrapped up parcel that must be unwrapped or undressed in order to reveal its true spiritual meaning.<sup>24</sup> By performing this exegetical striptease, the reader may realise that the martyrs would not have "undergone all this [suffering] if they had not *seen* [my italics] something ahead of them, something that is not even hinted at by the happiness this world offers?"<sup>25</sup> The exercise of the spiritually minded is to undress the Psalm. The reader becomes a voyeur. The third verse of the Psalm under discussion reads: "Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine on the sides of your house, your children like olive seedlings around your table." Here Augustine understands the man in the "blessed man" in the Psalm to be Christ, and the fruitful wife and children to both signify the church. The virulent Christ has many children with his wife, the martyrs and all other Christians. He describes Christ as one with seductive beauty, stating:

He is a bridegroom unsurpassed in beauty, yet he appeared ugly in the hands of his persecutors, for of him Isaiah had said not long before, "We saw him, and there was no fair form or comeliness in him" [Isa. 53:2]. Can that really be true, that our bridegroom is hideous? Perish the thought! How could he have

<sup>22</sup> The following discussion is a summary of De Wet (2011).

<sup>23</sup> For another interesting study of the same nature on Origen, cf. Miller (1986:241-53).

<sup>24</sup> *Enarrat. Ps. 127.2-3* (Boulding 2004:99-100); cf. *Enarrat. Ps. 32.2.9; 40.1; 63.1; 120.1, 13, 15; 137. 3-7, 17, 141.1-4*.

<sup>25</sup> *Enarrat. Ps. 127.2: *Ista omnia passi essent, nisi nescio quid viderent quo se tenderent, quod ad huius saeculi felicitatem non pertinet?** (PL 36;

Online version: accessed 02/08/2011, 23:58PM; URL:

[http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL\\_Augustine/esposizioni\\_salmi/index2.htm](http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL_Augustine/esposizioni_salmi/index2.htm)); translation: Boulding (2004:100).

been loved by virgins who sought no earthly husbands? He seemed only ugly to his persecutors...for they lacked the eyes to see Christ's beauty.<sup>26</sup>

He continues to praise Christ's beauty, and even men cannot withstand his beauty. By this queering of Christ,<sup>27</sup> his beauty is emphasised and "his beauty surpasses all other human beauty".<sup>28</sup> Augustine then refers to 1 Peter 2:21 and explains that the reason Christ is loved by everyone is because of his suffering. Christ is now transformed into the martyr *par excellence*, and like most of the early Christian martyr narratives, heavenly beauty sprouts from earthly suffering. Christ was ugly to carnally minded eyes, but irresistibly seductive to the spiritually minded eye. The logical inference of this Christoeroticism is that it is spiritual, and therefore the physical body is devalued. The martyrologies of the early Christians and later those of the Donatists had a very specific focus on the body, but here the focus is on the soul and the spirit. The body can be imprisoned and tortured – penetrated, as discussed above; but the soul is impenetrable and therefore not in a passive state like the bodies of the martyrs. Penetration is in any case not the problem for Augustine – the problem is erection, or desire. Suffering is now seen in the erection (desire) and not the penetration (physical torture). He needs to curb carnal desire by replacing it with spiritual desire (cf. Sawyer 1995:1-29; Burrus 2004:4). The spiritual readings must lead to better moral behaviour. As Miller (2009:90) states: "In the spiritual theatre of the mind that Augustine created for martyrs, pictomorphic vision was crucial, but ... it was a vehicle for the kinds of ethical judgement and conceptual understanding of central Christian beliefs ..."

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<sup>26</sup> *Enarrat. Ps. 127.8: sponsus ille quo nihil est pulchrius, qui quasi foedus apparuit inter manus persequentium, de quo paulo ante dicebat Isaias: Et vidimus eum, et non habebat speciem neque decorem. Ergo sponsus noster foedus est? Absit: quomodo enim illum virgines amarent, quae in terra maritos non quaesierunt? Ergo persequentibus foedus apparuit...non enim habebant oculos unde Christus pulcher videretur.*

(PL 36; Online version: accessed 03/08/2011, 00:13AM; URL: [http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL\\_Augustine/esposizioni\\_salmi/index2.htm](http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL_Augustine/esposizioni_salmi/index2.htm).); translation: Boulding (2004:104); cf. *Enarrat. Ps.* 69.1, 4, 8-9; 88.2.14; 102.3-5; 140.1-3.

<sup>27</sup> Both Barthes and Baudrillard note that seduction destabilises gender and other hierarchical constructs: Barthes (1973:16); Baudrillard (1979:22); cf. Burrus, Jordan and MacKendrick (2010:7).

<sup>28</sup> This is a reference to Psalm 44:3; *Enarrat. Ps. 127.8: Omnes homines superat illius pulchritudo*; (PL 36; Online version: accessed 03/08/2011, 00:21AM; URL: [http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL\\_Augustine/esposizioni\\_salmi/index2.htm](http://www.kennydominican.joyeurs.com/LatinPatrology/PL_Augustine/esposizioni_salmi/index2.htm).); translation: Boulding (2004:104).

### On the problem of suicidal suffering

The cause for martyrdom is central to Augustine's understanding of martyrdom. Gabarino (2007:56-57) highlights two important quotations in this instance. Firstly, there is Augustine's statement: "Let us love them, not their suffering, but the causes of their suffering. For if we loved only their sufferings, we are going to find many who suffered worse things in bad causes."<sup>29</sup> Secondly, in his commentary on Psalm 43:1, he uses the words "distinguish my cause" and as Gabarino has shown, Augustine often reiterates: "The punishment does not make the martyr, but the cause does."<sup>30</sup> The problem Augustine is addressing is the voluntary martyrdom of the Donatists. In this instance, suffering should never be suicidal, but always related to a good cause. This nullifies the suffering of the Donatists, who viewed suffering as a voluntary sacrifice. It is not suffering that makes one part of the true church (an argument against Donatist genealogy), but the cause of the suffering.

This also influences Augustine's views on spatiality. People flock to the shrines of the martyrs because of the cause and example of the martyrs.<sup>31</sup> People often went either to worship or to get drunk at the shrines, but the shrines still attract a crowd.<sup>32</sup> While the Donatists focus on buildings, Augustine's focus is rather on the impression of the massive crowds attracted by the shrines of the martyrs. Augustine, however, in terms of property, represented the "haves" while the Donatists were the "have-nots" — the bishop controlled a tremendous amount of property (Brown 1981:40). The spiritualisation of suffering also assumes its despatialisation. There is no more spectacle, no more holy places where new martyrs shed their blood (unlike the case of the Donatists) — suffering is domesticated now into the symbolic space of everyday life and the practice of spiritual discipline, but still celebrated are the feasts at the shrines and basilicas related to the martyrs of old.

### Augustine and physical violence

Much attention has been given to how Augustine uses the Psalms to domesticate suffering for the Catholics. But what of the physical suffering of the Donatists? For those who are not part of Augustine's group — the outsiders — physical coercion and compulsion formed the only solution. He was not

<sup>29</sup> *Serm.* 335.2 (PL 38:1471): *Amemus in eis, non passiones, sed causas passionum. Nam si amaverimus passiones tantum, multos inventuri sumus qui peiora patiuntur in causis malis;* cf. Gabarino (2007:54).

<sup>30</sup> *Serm.* 327.1 (PL 38:1451): *Non facit martyrem poena, sed causa;* cf. Gabarino (2007:54).

<sup>31</sup> See *Enarrat. Ps.* 118.12.1; 134.18; 137.14.

<sup>32</sup> See *Enarrat. Ps.* 59.15, 137.14.

always in favour of violence and physical coercion. Gaddis (2005:132-33) notes:

For Augustine, free will and compulsion were not necessarily incompatible. Thus an overtly coercive paradigm came to define the Catholic and imperial approach to the Donatist problem. Augustine's change of heart in the issue has rightly been seen as a defining moment in church history, an endorsement of muscular state intervention in matters of faith.

Violence against the minority was justified on the basis of faith. It was seen especially as being corrective. The "delinquency" of the Donatists should be corrected. It implied that Augustine viewed the death of the Donatist martyrs not as martyrdom, but as a death penalty to criminals. Hence his emphasis on the *cause* of suffering. Spiritual and domesticated suffering was conveniently reserved for the insiders of Augustine's group. For outsiders, those not belonging to the Catholic Church, corrective physical violence was the only answer to compel them to turn to the "true faith". Shaw (2011:56-145) has illustrated that violence in North Africa between Catholics and Donatists was a complex construction. Among the many images of hatred, the sermons of the bishops were crucial in promoting violence between various factions.

#### **Domesticated suffering and the psychagogical reformatory**

In this article I have attempted to show how Augustine, via his exegesis of the Psalms (as cultural capital), re-imagines and "domesticates" suffering as exemplified in the martyr narratives. His greatest challenge was the Donatists, who still had martyrs experiencing physical suffering and death. In the arena of popular philosophical preaching, both Augustine and the Donatists had overlapping discourses. These discourses were very present in Augustine's sermons on the Psalms which were especially popular on the feast days of the martyrs. Four discursive lines therefore emerge, and it is at their junction that suffering is domesticated. In the first instance, due to the lack of Catholic martyrs dying during his own time and his preference for prosopological exegesis, Augustine is less reliant on a discourse of genealogy than the Donatists. Secondly, both Augustine and the Donatists have prurient and erotic interpretations of the martyrologies, but Augustine prefers a spiritual sexualisation of Christ and his relationship to the church through his suffering, rather than the sado-eroticising of the present-day martyrs by the Donatists. Thirdly, Augustine does not make suffering a cause by itself, but separates it from cause in order to avoid suicidal suffering, especially found among the Donatists. Finally, the spiritualisation of suffering leads to a discourse of despatialisation rather than the typical Donatist valuation of

spaces of suffering. Suffering, for Augustine, takes place in the everyday life of the Catholic believer, and not as a spectacle in the arena.

The domestication of suffering, as exemplified in Augustine's readings of the Psalms, therefore takes place at the critical junction of the four discursive lines mentioned above. The purpose was to reclaim martyrdom for the post-martyrdom Catholic Church. But what is the effect of this domestication of suffering? Suffering now becomes psychagogical. It is therefore instructive to the soul.<sup>33</sup> The spiritual exercises of everyday Christian life, in which the Psalms played a crucial role, replace the spectacle of suffering. The *domus* of everyday life functions as a reformatory, and the new domesticated suffering acts as a form of discipline. Signs are replaced by exercises, and suffering is no longer a spectacle but comes as a disciplinarian of the soul, and the one who should tame the desires Augustine himself so often wrestles with in the arena of everyday life.

Domesticated suffering, however, is seen as a privilege by Augustine. One reserved for Catholics. Augustine had decided that for those outside the Catholic Church only physical, real suffering was the answer. This violence is also corrective, and the arena is also a reformatory to a certain extent — but one that should serve as a deterrent against “heresy”. Parallel to the discourse on domesticated and spiritual suffering, the blood of the Donatist martyrs still cries out.

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<sup>33</sup> For a discussion of psychagogy, cf. Maxwell (2006:89).

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