

Augustine's Friendship and the Shared Vision: The Correspondence between Augustine, Flavius Marcellinus, and Volusianus

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Introduction

In the corpus of Augustine's epistolary texts, some letters between Augustine and his correspondents describe his dealings with philosophical, theological, and ecclesiastical issues/questions posed to or by himself. He carried on an epistolary dialogue with them, which was evidence of the concern and activity, first of the leader of a monastic community of sorts and later of the bishop of a community of faith. Some groups of letters serve as the means of writing comments to inquiries and questions (*quaestiones et responsiones*: Roland Teske 2004). Presumably from 411 in different circumstances, Augustine started to communicate with the imperial commissioner Flavius Marcellinus and the distinguished pagan or less-committed Christian Volusianus. First, in May of 411, *Letters* 128 and 129 were sent to Marcellinus on behalf of the African episcopate (these two letters are legitimately attributed to Augustine) and, towards the end of 411 (or the beginning of 412), Augustine wrote to Marcellinus (*Epp.* 133 and 139) and to Apringius, proconsul of Africa and brother of Marcellinus (*Ep.* 134). While these letters are of special interest on account of the light they cast on the Conference with the Donatists in June 411 and the position of Marcellinus who adjudicated the Conference in Carthage, there was another series of letters (*Epp.* 132, 135, 136, 137, and 138) between September 411 and the end of February 412. Apart from the immediate problem of the Donatist schism, Augustine entered into an exchange with Volusianus (*Ep.* 132) who was at the time living in Carthage. In reply to the invitation of Augustine, in *Letter* 135 Volusianus posed questions about Christian teachings and in *Letter* 136, with reference to the questions raised by Volusianus, Marcellinus sent further questions to Augustine. Shortly after these letters, addressed to Volusianus in *Letter* 137, Augustine replied to both questions posed by Volusianus and those by Marcellinus and, in *Letter* 138, Augustine turned to Marcellinus with explanations about questions referred to in *Letter* 136. This dossier of letters, in particular the sub-group of *Letters* 135, 136, and 137, reveals the characteristics of a sort of commentary to questions. From

a social and cultural perspective of friendship and the communication, what do we know from these letters? What did he consider to be a basis for uniting them in mutual exchange? In this paper, I shall focus on three letter exchange with a Christian and pagan in North African society, thereby examining the evidence of revealing the shared vision.

Letter 135

In response to the suggestion Augustine made in *Letter 132*, (that is, to read the scriptures and to ask as many questions as might arise), Volusianus begins by sending greetings to Augustine: “You, a man of goodness and an example of righteousness, ask me to question you on some ambiguous passage of scripture in order that I might be taught in a learned manner.” (*Ep.* 135.1; WSA 2/2,208) Then he decides to submit the report of a recent meeting with his friends in Carthage, in which they discussed various topics. In particular, the *partitio rhetorica* (rhetorical distribution of parts) was considered. Because Volusianus acknowledges that Augustine was a teacher of rhetoric, he reports first on the technical issues examined in the gatherings, “the great ornament in the arrangement of parts, the charm of metaphor, and the great loftiness of comparison ... light and smooth verses and, ... the harmonious variety in the divisions of lines.” (*Ep.* 135.1; 208) and summarises the tradition of philosophical schools and their principal achievements. Apart from the interest in this review undertaken by a pagan intellectual in late antiquity, it is noteworthy that Volusianus attempts to turn the attention of Augustine to a close correlation between rhetoric and philosophy: he confirms that “I speak to someone who knows about that [*scil. partitio rhetorica*]” and that “you do not leave even this part of eloquence unmentioned and without honor.” He appreciates the significance of Augustine’s philosophical investigation “which you [*scil. Augustine*] yourself are accustomed to cultivate as esoteric in the manner of Aristotle.” (*Ep.* 135.1; 208) Volusianus would invite him to join the circle as a master of rhetoric. As one who belonged to the Carthaginian circle, what did Volusianus hope for? It seems probable that, along with the religious orientation, he defends their engagement “in accord with our various talents and interests” (*Ep.* 135.1; 208) from the authority of the bishop of Hippo.

As for the questions he was invited to write back to Augustine, Volusianus poses not his own but questions from his friend in the latter part of the letter. Indeed, these is a clear incongruity in their concern and expectation. After Volusianus points to a difficulty of the philosophical pursuit of both “the endless passion for argument” and

“the truth that is known less” (*Ep.* 135.1; 209), he gives an account of the meeting: “We were stunned and silent.” (*Ep.* 135.2; 209) It is because, “one of the many asked, ‘And who is perfectly imbued with the wisdom of Christianity who can resolve certain ambiguous points on which I am stuck and can strengthen my hesitant assent with true or probable grounds for belief?’ ” (*Ep.* 135.2; 209) They had some serious doubts as to the *sapientia christianitatis* in the pursuit of truth. A friend of Volusianus enumerates the list of objections: that is, the wonder of Christ’s conception and birth and the virginity of Mary, the mystery of the Incarnation, and the miracles attributed to him. It is further reported that “we interrupted him though he had further questions”. Thus, from the final part of the letter, it is admitted that, while Augustine requested him to send the questions of his own interest, Volusianus submitted the report of a circle and the questions of the members. In this vein, the letter from Volusianus is far from what Augustine expected to read.

Letter 136

In the beginning of *Letter 136* addressed to Augustine, Marcellinus confirms that “The illustrious lord, Volusianus, read to me the letter of Your Beatitude; in fact, at my insistence, he read it to many others. I thoroughly admired what you said, though everything you say is truly admirable.” (*Ep.* 136.1; 210) Along with the admiration for Augustine’s generous invitation to Volusianus (“the letter of Your Beatitude”, that is, referring to *Letter 132*), Marcellinus’ remark in *Letter 137* also suggests that, not only does he know well about the gatherings in Carthage, but he may read *Letter 135* addressed to Augustine: “as you yourself will also be able to see, he [*scil.* Volusianus] has demanded in a cultivated and precise language and with the clear splendor of Roman eloquence.” (*Ep.* 136.1; 210) Thus, as a person who knows the circumstances, Marcellinus would write this *Letter 136* to Augustine, as a kind of appendix to the previous letter (135) and as a report of the meeting from different viewpoint.

Marcellinus first takes up the problem of miracles that was presented by Volusianus in the closing part of *Letter 135*. He refers to those who “set before us their Apolinus and Apuleius and other practitioners of the arts of magic, ... their miracles are greater” than what the Lord did. Then he informs Augustine about other objections: Volusianus did not want to write them and did not agree “to remain unspoken.” (*Ep.* 136.2; 211) He claims that it is necessary (first) “to give a clear reason why this God, who is also maintained to be the God of the Old Testament, took delight in the new sacrifices after having rejected the old ones.” (*Ep.* 136.2; 211) Another

objection is raised in a different context: “the preaching and teaching of Christ is in no way compatible with the practices of the state. ... who would permit an enemy to take something from him or would not want to redress evil by the right of war against a plunderer of a Roman province?” (*Ep.* 136.2; 211) This objection is related with a much more current political situation: some pagans have blamed Rome’s sack on Christianity. Although Volusianus does not make a further criticism, it is indispensable for the Carthaginian circle to discuss and explore approaches to this problem. Indeed, it is admitted that some of the members of the meeting would take refuge in Carthage after the sack of Rome. Since Marcellinus is familiar with them in Carthage, he demands the reply from Augustine, which will be sent to him later in *Letter 138*.

In the closing section of this letter, Marcellinus praises Augustine for his erudition. At the same time, he comments that this letter “will undoubtedly be passed on to the hands of many.” (*Ep.* 136.3; 211) Marcellinus’ comment on “a wealthy landowner and lord from Hippo Regius” in the gatherings seems to be crucial advice and encouragement to take care of the situation and background of the group: he “praised Your Holiness with ironic flattery and claimed that, ... he was hardly satisfied.” (*Ep.* 136.3; 211)

Letter 137

This letter is well structured and provides a repertoire of rhetorical devices, which seems to be accord with the style and intention of his correspondent. As he reminds Volusianus of the initial stage of the exchange, Augustine tells him that he is keen on answering his questions in *Letter 135*: “I thought that it was hardly just that I should put off a questioner whom I myself had encouraged to ask questions.” (*Ep.* 137.1.1; 213) Thus, in the beginning he deals with Volusianus with politeness and courtesy and immediately directs his attention not only to “Christian doctrine” but rather to the “grace of Christ”. He is concerned about the care of the soul, “not for the well-being of this life, ... but for that well-being whose attainment and eternal possession we are Christians”. (*Ep.* 137.1.1; 213) Pastoral care for “proud little souls [who] place no value on it [*scil.* grace of salvation]” is crucial to his reply to Volusianus.

After repeating the question regarding the virginity of Mary and the miracles (§ 2), Augustine warns him of showing overconfidence in the intelligence, experience, and learning of himself. And he claims that “the faith without which one does not live a pious and upright life.” (*Ep.* 137.1.3; 214) Because of the “shadows of mysteries, [and] a

depth of wisdom” (*Ep.* 137.1.3; 214), he advises ‘always be a beginner’. (§ 3) Then, from the next section, Augustine is engaged in the consideration of the problem of the Incarnation. He clearly rejects the view that God is a body. Since God “is able to be whole everywhere and to be contained in no place”, (*Ep.* 137.2.4; 215) God should not be understood from a materialistic point of view. (§ 4) By shifting attention from the sensible to the spiritual, (§ 5-6) Augustine’s focus on the Word of God shows him a way of comparing its omnipresence with “a passing word of a human beings.” (*Ep.* 137.2.7; 216) Based on the reflection that “God is great not by mass but by power” (*Ep.* 137.2.8; 216), it can be admitted that God was not taken into the body of an infant. Here Augustine makes clear the basis for the line of argument: “If a reason is asked for, it will not be miraculous; if an example is demanded, it will not be singular. Let us grant that God can do something that we admit that we cannot search out.” (*Ep.* 137.2.8; 217)

Next, he proceeds to the second point of the objections: “the very fact that he relaxes in sleep, is nourished by food, and feels all the human emotions convinces human beings that it is a man whom the Word does not consume but assumes.” (*Ep.* 137.3.9; 217) Given the assertion that Christ imparts faith to the minds and brings them to the contemplation of the truth, he confirms that the mediator between God and human beings unites two natures in one person: “The man, of course, was added to God; God did not withdraw from himself.” (*Ep.* 137.3.10; 218) His account proceeds from the union of soul and body to the Word of God (§ 11). Augustine brings together the threads of argument and points to the importance of the incarnation: “He came, ... as a source of teaching ... He came as a source of help, ... without the grace of faith, ... no one can conquer his sinful desires and be purified by pardon and forgiveness”. (*Ep.* 137.3.12; 219)

Augustine deals with the third of his objections with regard to the miracles of Christ which, according to the opponents, were not greater than what the Jews and the magicians of the Egyptians did. Although it is clearly admitted that Christ performed miracles of his own, “to be born of a virgin, to rise from the dead, to ascend into heaven” (*Ep.* 137.4.13; 220), those who did not believe the miracles of Christ regarded them as unworthy of him. (§ 14) He suggests the futility of further discussion and debate on these problems. As mentioned in the beginning of this letter (§ 3), he reminds him of the necessity of the faith that “opens the door for understanding, while unbelief closes it.” (*Ep.* 137.4.15; 221) “Christ came; in his birth, life, word, deeds,

sufferings, death, resurrection, and ascension all the prediction of the prophets are fulfilled.” (*Ep.* 137.4.16; 221) Not only the whole history of the Jewish people but the expansion of the Church of Christ offers the conclusive proof of the truth. (§ 16) Twofold commandment “upon which Christ says that the whole law and the prophets depend”, that is, love of God and of neighbour is confirmed. (*Ep.* 137.5.17; 222) “In these commandment” there is the welfare of the society. He adds that in the simplicity of the scriptural language “it [*scil.* scripture] not only feeds them with the evident truth but also exercises them with the hidden truth, ... evil minds are salutarily corrected, little minds are fed, and great minds are delighted.” (*Ep.* 137.5.18; 223) His attention is, therefore, directed to the pastoral / spiritual care for the well-being of not only the state but the individual. And in the closing part of the letter, Augustine asks Volusianus to reply with further questions (§ 19)

Concluding observations

In response to the request from Augustine, Volusianus sent him *Letter* 135 in which Volusianus offered the questions with regard to the heart of Christian teaching. Although Volusianus seems to complete the assignment, he incorporates another element into his reply: his appreciation of Augustine’s philosophical investigation that is conducted together with a variety of rhetorical devices and the report of a Carthaginian circle. Indeed, it can not be determined whether the questions Volusianus explained in the letter were put by a member of the gatherings or by himself. However, it is clearly admitted that his real concern is for the art of rhetoric, which he shared with the members of the circle. Marcellinus’ complementary letter would relate to the circumstances in Carthage. Not only did he take up and explain the objections posed by Volusianus, but he turned the attention of Augustine to the atmosphere of the circle. His comment on the wide circulation of the letter implies that Augustine should be cautious about the way of withdrawing the objection to “Christian doctrine.”

Letter 137 appears to have a double-line structure in his reply to Volusianus, in which, first to the reader (not excluding Volusianus), that is, mainly to the members of the circle whose primary interest was in the examination of some doubts about Christian teaching, Augustine had to explain in detail and approach these problems from diverse angles. Following the advice of Marcellinus, most part of this letter would be written as a long apology and defence to pagan aristocrats in Carthage. Second to his correspondent Volusianus, Augustine incorporates another kind of message into

the letter. In the beginning, he clearly insists that his concern is for the care of “proud little souls” and the welfare. In so far as Augustine attempted to develop a one-to-one relationship with Volusianus, he asked him to change his perception of Christian teaching. Thus, he repeatedly teaches him the way to the truth and faith and, in the concluding part, focuses on the way to the wisdom of Christianity: twofold commandment and the exercise of mind by the scriptural interpretation. It is very likely that, in the subsidiary part of the letter, Augustine sends him a message of the basis for the shared vision of what is expected from himself: the well-being in the grace of Christ. While both persons seem to prepare different scripts for their own interest, Augustine’s comments to inquiries and questions intend to serve as a mean to arrive at the consensus of the way to the Christian faith rather than to exchange their understanding of Christianity.