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Friendship and a Shared Vision: Augustine's Correspondence with Christian and Pagan Intellectuals*

In the corpus of Augustine's epistolary texts, some letters between Augustine and his correspondents describe his dealings with philosophical, theological and ecclesiastical questions posed to or by himself.¹ He carried on a dialogue with them that provided evidence of the interests and activities, first of the leader of a monastic community of sorts, and later of the bishop of a community of faith.² From 387 until the death of his close friend in 391, Augustine's epistolary exchange with Nebridius centred on the problem of the *beata uita*, *anima* and Platonic teaching.³ From the mid 390s, he entered into a correspondence with Paulinus of Nola and his wife Therasia. During a period of more than a decade, they exchanged views about spiritual, exegetical and religio-political issues.⁴ There was another exchange of thoughts with Jerome, first from 394/5 to 405

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¹ For a selected bibliography of Augustine's letters, see Divjak 1996–2002, 1046–1057. Another comprehensive information of the correspondence of Augustine is given by a searchable database: *Scrinium Augustini: The World of Augustine's Letters* (Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, Poland) <<http://www.scrinium.umk.pl>>, accessed 29 September 2015.

² For the chronological survey of Augustine's letters, see CCSL 31; 31A; 31B; Divjak 1996–2002, 1027–1036; Eno 1999, 299–305; Lancel 2011a, 159–175; Perler and Maier 1969; Teske 2001–2005.

³ For the correspondence between Augustine and Nebridius, see Folliet 1987; Merenciano 2004.

⁴ For the correspondence with Paulinus and his wife, see Fabre 1949; Lienhard 1990; Conybeare 2000.

and again from 415 to 419.⁵ It started with Augustine's question about a scriptural translation and the interpretation of Galatians. They expressed their views on the teaching of Pelagius and his followers.

It is interesting to note that some groups of letters serve as a way of writing comments on inquiries and questions.⁶ 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.⁷ 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, in *Letter* 137, addressed to Volusianus, Augustine replied to questions posed by both Volusianus and Marcellinus, and in *Letter* 138, Augustine turned to Marcellinus with the explanation to 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 on questions. From a social and cultural perspective of friendship and communication, what do we know from these letters? What did Augustine consider to be the basis uniting them in mutual exchange?⁸ In

⁵ For the correspondence between Augustine and Jerome, see White 1990; Hennings 1993; and Squires 2008.

⁶ See Teske 2004. See also Magny 2014, 105–106.

⁷ Moreau 1973; Ayres 2008a. On Marcellinus, see *PCBE* 2, s.v. Flavius Marcellinus 2, 671–688; *PLRE* 2, s.v. Fl. Marcellinus 10, 711–712; Drecoll 2004–2010; Morgenstern 1993, 112–114. For the role of Marcellinus played in Augustine's literary, social and ecclesiastical activities, see e.g. Dunphy 2002; Ebbeler 2012, 191–192; McLynn 1999. On Volusianus, see *PCBE* 2, s.v. Volusianus 1, 2340–2341; *PLRE* 2, s.v. Volusianus 6, 1184–1185; Morgenstern 1993, 125. For the exchanges between Augustine and Volusianus, see also Chastagnol 1956, 241–253; Divjak 1996–2002, 945–946 and 974–975; Jones 2014, 82–83 and 93; Lancel 2002, 314–318.

⁸ See Rebenich 2012.

this paper, I shall focus on three letters exchanged with a Christian and pagan in North African society, thereby examining the evidence revealing the shared vision.

LETTER 135: MUTUAL GREETINGS AND THE EXPRESSING OF THEIR INTERESTS

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),⁹ 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.’¹⁰ He then submits 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 of the recognition that Augustine was a teacher of rhetoric, Volusianus reports first on the technical issues examined in the gathering: ‘They spoke of the great ornament in the arrangement of parts, the charm of metaphor and the great loftiness of comparison. They spoke of light and smooth verses and, as I said, the harmonious variety in the divisions of lines.’¹¹ He turns to summarise 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: ‘The topic was, nonetheless, the rhetorical distribution of parts in a discourse. I speak to someone who knows about that.’¹² His expectation is clearly that ‘you do not leave even this part of eloquence unmentioned and without honor’.¹³ He

⁹ Aug. *Ep.* 132; CCSL 31B, 240; WSA 2/2, 202: *hortor, ut ualeo, ut Litterarum uere certeque sanctarum studio te curam non pigeat impendere. [...] Praecipue apostolorum linguas exhortor ut legas; [...] Si quid autem, uel cum legis uel cum cogitas, tibi oritur quaestionis, in quo dissoluendo uidear necessarius, scribe, ut rescribam.*

¹⁰ Aug. *Ep.* 135.1; CCSL 31B, 249; WSA 2/2, 208: *Petis me, uir probitatis iustitiaeque documentum, ut aliqua ex ambiguīs lectionis perite discenda perconter.*

¹¹ Aug. *Ep.* 135.1; CCSL 31B, 250; WSA 2/2, 208: *Dicebatur ergo, quantus oeconomiae esset ornatus, quae metaphorarum uenustas, quanta in comparatione sublimitas; iam leues enodesque uersus atque, ut ita dixerim, caesurarum modulata uariatio.*

¹² Aug. *Ep.* 135.1; CCSL 31B, 249; WSA 2/2, 208: *Erat tamen sermo rhetorica partitio. Apud agnoscentem loquor.*

¹³ Aug. *Ep.* 135.1; CCSL 31B, 250; WSA 2/2, 208: *ne hanc quidem eloquentiae partem tacitam aut inhonoram relinquīs.*

appreciates the significance of Augustine's philosophical investigation: 'Then the talk turned to philosophy which you yourself are accustomed to cultivate as esoteric in the manner of Aristotle.'¹⁴ What does Volusianus, as a member of the Carthaginian circle, hope for? Volusianus would invite him to join the circle as a master of rhetoric. It seems also likely that he defends their engagement 'in accord with our various talents and interests'¹⁵ from the authority of the bishop of Hippo.

As for the questions he was asked to write back to Augustine, Volusianus poses not his own but questions from a friend in the latter part of the letter. After he points to a difficulty in the philosophical pursuit of both 'the endless passion for argument' and 'the truth that is known less after one has presumed that it can be known',¹⁶ he gives a brief account of the meeting: 'We were stunned and silent.'¹⁷ 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?"'¹⁸ They had some serious doubts as to the *sapientia christianitatis* in the pursuit of truth. A friend of Volusianus enumerates the list of objections: 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'.¹⁹ Thus, from the final part of the letter, it is admitted that, despite Augustine's request to send questions of his own interest, Volusianus submitted the report of a circle and the questions from a member. This letter was far from what Augustine had expected to read. Indeed, there is a clear incongruity in the concern and expectation of both correspondents.

¹⁴ Aug. *Ep.* 135.1; CCSL 31B, 250; WSA 2/2, 208: *Tunc ad familiarem tuam philosophiam sermo deflectit, quam ipse Aristoteleo more tamquam esotericam fouere consueueras.*

¹⁵ Aug. *Ep.* 135.1; CCSL 31B, 249; WSA 2/2, 208: *pro ingenii studiisque sententiae.*

¹⁶ Aug. *Ep.* 135.1; CCSL 31B, 250; WSA 2/2, 209: *quid inter omnes infinita disputandi libido tuncque magis ignorata ueritas, postquam praesumptum est quod possit agnosci.*

¹⁷ Aug. *Ep.* 135.2; CCSL 31B, 250; WSA 2/2, 209: *Stupemus tacentes.*

¹⁸ Aug. *Ep.* 135.2; CCSL 31B, 250; WSA 2/2, 209: *'Et quis,' inquit, 'est sapientia ad perfectum christianitatis imbutus, qui ambigua, in quibus haereo, possit aperire, dubiosque assensus meos uera uel uerisimili credulitate firmare?'*

¹⁹ Aug. *Ep.* 135.2; CCSL 31B, 251; WSA 2/2, 209: *Interuenimus ulterius inquirenti.*

LETTER 136: COMPLEMENTARY WARNING INFORMATION

In the opening of *Letter* 136 addressed to Augustine, Marcellinus tells him 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.’²⁰ 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 also have read *Letter* 135 addressed to Augustine: ‘[A]s 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.’²¹ Thus, as a person who knows the circumstances, Marcellinus wrote this *Letter* 136 to Augustine, which could be defined as a kind of appendix to the previous letter (*Ep.* 135) and as a report of the meeting from a different viewpoint.

Marcellinus first takes up the problem of miracles that was mentioned by Volusianus in the closing part of *Letter* 135. He refers to those who ‘set before us their Apollinius and Apuleius and other practitioners of the arts of magic, and they claim that their miracles are greater’²² than those performed by the Lord. He then informs Augustine about other objections. Indeed, Volusianus did not agree ‘to remain unspoken’²³ about many questions. He claims that it is necessary ‘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.’²⁴ Another objection is raised in a different context: ‘[T]he 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?’²⁵ This

²⁰ Aug. *Ep.* 136.1; CCSL 31B, 253; WSA 2/2, 210: *Vir illustris Volusianus beatitudinis tuae mihi litteras legit, immo me quidem cogente pluribus legit, quae, licet omnia quae a te dicuntur, uere miranda sint, usquequaque miratus sum.*

²¹ Aug. *Ep.* 136.1; CCSL 31B, 253; WSA 2/2, 210: *Sed tamen satis, sicut etiam ipse probare dignaberis, culto accuratoque sermone, et Romanae eloquentiae nitore perspicio, aliqua sibi exsolvi impendio postulavit.*
²² Aug. *Ep.* 136.1; CCSL 31B, 254; WSA 2/2, 210–211: *Apollonium si quidem suum nobis et Apuleium aliosque magicae artis homines in medium proferunt, quorum maiora contendunt existitisse miracula.*

²³ Aug. *Ep.* 136.2; CCSL 31B, 254; WSA 2/2, 211: *tacere non passus est.*

²⁴ Aug. *Ep.* 136.2; CCSL 31B, 254; WSA 2/2, 211: *reddi [...] ad liquidum possit cur hic Deus, qui et Veteris Testamenti Deus esse firmatur, spretis veteribus sacrificiis delectatus est novis.*

²⁵ Aug. *Ep.* 136.2; CCSL 31B, 254–255; WSA 2/2, 211: *eius praedicatio atque doctrina reipublicae moribus nulla ex parte conueniat [...] Nam quis tolli sibi ab hoste aliquid patiatum uel Romanae prouinciae depraedatori non mala uelit belli iure reponere?*

objection is related to a much more current political situation: some pagans have blamed Rome's sack on Christianity. Although Volusianus does not make any further criticism, it is indispensable for the Carthaginian circle to discuss and explore approaches to this problem. For it is admitted that several members of the gathering took refuge in Carthage after the sack of Rome. Since Marcellinus was familiar with them in Carthage, he demanded a response from Augustine, who later sent him *Letter 138*.

In the closing section of this letter, Marcellinus praises Augustine for his erudition. At the same time, he comments that Augustine's response to these objections 'will undoubtedly be passed on to the hands of many.'²⁶ Marcellinus' remark about 'a wealthy landowner and lord from Hippo Regius'²⁷ in the gathering seems to be a useful warning and advice to cope with the situation and background of the group: he 'praised Your Holiness with ironic flattery and claimed that, [...] he was hardly satisfied.'²⁸

LETTER 137: WHAT IS THE FOCUS OF AUGUSTINE'S REPLY?

This letter is well structured as a sequence of strenuous efforts to offer a compelling explanation of Christian teaching for both the members of the Carthaginian circle and Volusianus himself. It also provides a repertoire of rhetorical devices that correspond to the style and design of his correspondent. As he is reminded about the start of the letter exchange, Augustine tells Volusianus that he is keen on answering the questions posed 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.'²⁹ Thus, in the beginning of this letter, he treats Volusianus with politeness and courtesy but at the same time draws attention to the need for 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',³⁰ since Augustine maintains that the pastoral care for 'proud little souls [who] place no value on it

²⁶ Aug. *Ep.* 136.3; CCSL 31B, 254–255; WSA 2/2, 211: *multorum manibus sine dubio tradetur*.

²⁷ Aug. *Ep.* 136.3; CCSL 31B, 255; WSA 2/2, 211: *eximius Hipponensis regionis possessor et dominus praesens*.

²⁸ Aug. *Ep.* 136.3; CCSL 31B, 255; WSA 2/2, 211: *Sanctitatem tuam sub ironiae adulatione laudaret, [...] minime satisfactum esse contenderet*.

²⁹ Aug. *Ep.* 137.1; CCSL 31B, 256; WSA 2/2, 213: *nequaquam iustum esse arbitratu, ut quem ad quaerendum exhortatus ipse fueram, differrem quaerentem*.

³⁰ Aug. *Ep.* 137.1; CCSL 31B, 256; WSA 2/2, 213: *ad salutem non huius vitae, [...] sed illam salutem, propter quam adipiscendam et in aeternum obtinendam christiani sumus*.

[*scil.* the dispensation of so great a grace]³¹ is a crucial element to be integrated into his reply to Volusianus.

After restating the question as to the virginity of Mary and the miracles, Augustine warns Volusianus against exhibiting overconfidence in the intelligence, experience and learning of Augustine himself. He also claims the necessity of ‘the faith without which one does not live a pious and upright life’.³² Because of the profundity and insight of the Christian writings, he advises the reader that they should always be a beginner: ‘[T]here remain to be understood by those making progress so many things, and things cloaked with so many shadows of mysteries, and there lies hidden so great a depth of wisdom.’³³ Then, from the next section, Augustine considers 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’,³⁴ God should not be understood from a materialistic point of view. By shifting attention from the sensible to the spiritual, Augustine’s focus on the Word of God offers him a way of comparing its omnipresence with ‘a passing word of a human beings’.³⁵ On the basis of the reflection that ‘God is great not by mass but by power’,³⁶ 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.’³⁷

Next, he proceeds to the second of the objections: ‘[T]he 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.’³⁸ Given the assertion that Christ imparts faith to 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

³¹ Aug. Ep. 137.1; CCSL 31B, 256–257; WSA 2/2, 213: *tantae gratiae dispensatio, quam superbae animulae nihili pendunt.*

³² Aug. Ep. 137.3; CCSL 31B, 258; WSA 2/2, 214: *fidem [...] sine qua pie recteque non uiuitur.*

³³ Aug. Ep. 137.3; CCSL 31B, 258; WSA 2/2, 214: *tam multa, tamque multiplicibus mysteriorum umbraculis opacata intellegenda proficientibus restant, tantaque [...] latet altitudo sapientiae.*

³⁴ Aug. Ep. 137.4; CCSL 31B, 259; WSA 2/2, 215: *Nouit ubique totus esse et nullo contineri loco.*

³⁵ Aug. Ep. 137.7; CCSL 31B, 262; WSA 2/2, 216: *uerbum hominis transiens.*

³⁶ Aug. Ep. 137.8; CCSL 31B, 262; WSA 2/2, 216: *Neque enim mole sed uirtute magnus est deus.*

³⁷ Aug. Ep. 137.8; CCSL 31B, 263; WSA 2/2, 217: *Hic si ratio quaeritur, non erit mirabile: si exemplum poscitur, non erit singulare. Demus deum aliquid posse, quod nos fateamur inuestigare non posse.*

³⁸ Aug. Ep. 137.9; CCSL 31B, 263; WSA 2/2, 217: *illud, quod in somnos soluitur et cibo alitur et omnes humanos sentit affectus, hominem persuadet hominibus, quem non consumpsit utique, sed assumpsit.*

to God; God did not withdraw from himself.³⁹ His account proceeds from the union of soul and body to the Word of God. Augustine brings together the threads of the argument and points to the importance of the Incarnation: '[T]he Word came to human beings as a source of teaching and of help for attaining everlasting salvation. [...] He came as a source of help, [...] without the grace of faith, which comes from him, no one can conquer his sinful desires and be purified by pardon and forgiveness.'⁴⁰

Augustine deals with the third of the objections about the miracles of Christ, which, according to his opponents, were not greater than those performed by the Jews and the magicians of the Egyptians. Although it is explicitly admitted that Christ performed miracles of his own, 'to be born of a virgin, to rise from the dead, to ascend into heaven',⁴¹ those who did not believe the miracles of Christ regarded them as unworthy of him. Augustine suggests the futility of further discussion and debate on these problems. As mentioned at the beginning of this letter (§ 3), he reminds Volusianus of the necessity of the faith that 'opens the door for understanding, while unbelief closes it'.⁴² Not only the whole history of the Jewish people but also the expansion of the Church of Christ offers the conclusive proof of the truth: 'Christ came; in his birth, life, word, deeds, sufferings, death, resurrection, and ascension all the predictions of the prophets are fulfilled.'⁴³ The twofold commandment 'upon which Christ says that the whole law and the prophets depend',⁴⁴ that is, love of God and of neighbour, is confirmed. 'In these commandments' 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'.⁴⁵ His attention is, therefore, directed to spiritual care, for the

³⁹ Aug. *Ep.* 137.10; CCSL 31B, 264; WSA 2/2, 218: *homo quippe deo accessit, non deus a se recessit.*

⁴⁰ Aug. *Ep.* 137.12; CCSL 31B, 266–267; WSA 2/2, 219: *uenit hominibus magisterium et adiutorium ad capessendam sempiternam salutem: [...] adiutorium autem, quod sine gratia fidei, quae ab illo est, nemo potest uincere concupiscentias uitiosas et, [...] ueniali remissione purgari.*

⁴¹ Aug. *Ep.* 137.13; CCSL 31B, 268; WSA 2/2, 220: *nasci de uirgine, a mortuis resurgere, in caelum ascendere.*

⁴² Aug. *Ep.* 137.15; CCSL 31B, 269; WSA 2/2, 221: *intellectui [...] aditum aperit, infidelitas claudit.*

⁴³ Aug. *Ep.* 137.16; CCSL 31B, 270; WSA 2/2, 221: *Venit et Christus, complentur in eius ortu, uita, factis, dictis, passionibus, morte, resurrectione, ascensione, omnia praeconia prophetarum.*

⁴⁴ Aug. *Ep.* 137.17; CCSL 31B, 272; WSA 2/2, 222: *ex quibus Christus dicit totam legem prophetasque pendere.*

⁴⁵ Aug. *Ep.* 137.18; CCSL 31B, 272–273; WSA 2/2, 223: *non solum manifesta pascit, sed etiam secreta exerceat ueritate [...] His salubriter et praua corriguntur et parua nutriuntur et magna oblectantur ingenia.*

well-being of not only the state but also the individual. And in the closing part of the letter, Augustine asks Volusianus to reply with further questions.

CONCLUSION

In response to a request from Augustine, Volusianus sent him *Letter 135*, in which he raised questions about the heart of Christian teaching. Although he seems to complete the assignment, Volusianus incorporates another element into his reply: an appreciation of the philosophical investigation of Augustine that is expressed together with a variety of rhetorical devices and a report on the Carthaginian circle. Indeed, it can be accepted that the questions Volusianus presented in the letter were established by the consensus of members of the gathering. It is also admitted that his primary interest is in the art of rhetoric, which he shared with the members of the circle. Marcellinus' complementary letter (*Ep. 136*) would relate to the circumstances in Carthage. Not only did he take up and explain the objections posed by Volusianus, but he also 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'.

Another letter (*Ep. 137*) appears to have a double-layered structure in which, for the members of the circle whose primary interest was in the examination of some doubts about Christian teaching, Augustine first had to explain these problems in detail and approach them from diverse angles. Following the advice of Marcellinus, most of this letter would be written to the pagan aristocrats in Carthage as a long apology and defence. At the same time, for his correspondent, Volusianus, Augustine incorporates another kind of message into the letter. At the beginning, he clearly insists that his concern is for the care of the 'proud little souls' and, ultimately, their welfare in the city of God. In so far as Augustine attempted to develop a one-to-one relationship with Volusianus, he asked him to change the perception of Christian teaching. In the body of the letter, he repeatedly and consistently shows Volusianus the way to the truth and faith and, in the concluding part, focuses on the way to the wisdom of Christianity: the twofold commandment and the exercise of the mind by scriptural interpretation. It is very likely that in this subsidiary part of the letter, Augustine sends Volusianus a message about the basis for their shared vision: well-being in the grace of Christ. While both Augustine and Volusianus seem to prepare different scripts for their own interest, Augustine's comments to questions intend to function as a means for the care of the soul.