

Blast From the Past: Heretics

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 24, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

As mentioned, this week I am presenting a talk to the RCIA about Church History. This is an excerpt from my text:

I. We must be grateful to the heretics. By raising issues falsely, they brought the Church to reach correct conclusions about issues that had not been previously addressed. We have seen how this worked regarding the nature of Jesus as the Son of God. For another example, let us consider the Donatists. In the years 303-305, the emperor Diocletian unleashed a harsh persecution of the Church. Many were unequal to the call of martyrdom and they denied the faith. The Donatists, who were the puritans of their age, argued that the sin of denying the faith was so great, sacramental confession could not absolve it. Secondly, priests and bishops who had denied the faith had, according to the Donatists, so compromised themselves and their identity, that they could not validly perform the sacraments. So, someone who had been baptized or married by someone who had denied the faith during the persecutions was not really baptized or married. The issue was especially fraught with emotion because, at this time, sacramental confession was usually dispensed by a martyr and so the Donatists insisted that the absolution of those who had refused to deny the faith was somehow cheapened if others could gain absolution from those who had fallen. St. Augustine argued first that the mercy of God was greater than all sins, and that sacramental confession could absolve those who had denied the faith. Additionally, he taught that the actor in the sacraments is God, not the priest, so the personal holiness of the priests was not essential to the grace of the sacrament ? although it is a very good thing that priests are personally holy. This doctrine ? *ex opere operato* ? remains a teaching of the Church and it is not clear we would have this profound, and very beautiful understanding of our sacramental life if it had not been for the Donatists who, in their error, called forth the truth. But, the Donatist controversy, like the Novatianist controversy the century before, also showed something distinctive about Roman Catholicism: We resist the ?faithful remnant? mentality and view it with theological suspicion. There is always a temptation in the religious life to exult oneself but the stern warning in the Gospels is clear ? the man who prayed at synagogue ?I thank thee Lord that I am not like other man? is not the model for Catholic theology and discipleship.

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