

Negotia Christianorum... (Apologeticum 39,1-20).

A study of some salient themes of the moral life and discipline in the daily life of early Christian communities – 2nd & 3rd CE. Tertullian and the Case of North Africa.

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In this article, the author attempts an appreciation, description and critical evaluation, of the theological and sociological implications of some of the major philanthropic and other religious activities (negotia) practiced within Christian communities of the second and third centuries CE which Tertullian had come across. The North African theologian meant to bring to the light of day the nature and content of these activities in order to appreciate them and defend them against the futility and injustice of pagan criticism and because of which those quiet and law-abiding citizens Christians in North Africa were being harshly and unjustly harassed and persecuted. Fr Salvino Caruana OSA is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Church History and Patrology in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Malta, and Director of the Augustinian Institute – Pieta.

In 197CE the Catholic Septimius Florens Tertullianus, otherwise known simply as Tertullian of Carthage,¹ took to the defense of his fellow Christians in two of the more renowned apologetical works of his addressed to the pagan authorities in North Africa, namely, in the *Ad Nationes*, and in the more direct work of his addressed to the magistracy, the *Apologeticum*. The task he had set for his works was a thorough defense of the innocent and impeccable morality of the activities that characterized the daily life of Christians. These were therefore works directed against the classical pagan accusations of the immorality, licentiousness and factiousness in the daily life and gatherings of Catholic Christians in North Africa. The accusation was leveled mainly *vis-à-vis* their neglect towards their duties in daily civic life, their critical

1. For the ancient standard biographical and bibliographical information about Tertullian, see St Jerome, *De Viris Illustribus* 53: *Patrologia Latina (PL)* 23, 663; and the brief entry in the *Chronicon* for the year 208CE: *Griechische Christliche Schriftsteller (GCS)* 47, 212: “Tertullianus Afer, centurionis proconularis filius, omnium ecclesiarum sermone celebratur”.

attitudes towards pagan virtuousness, and their stubborn denial of compliance to the imperial religious obligations demanded by Roman citizenship.

The *Ad Nationes*², in two books, was composed by Tertullian at the beginning of 197CE, and it was the first of its kind in refuting the senselessness of pagan hatred that revealed itself in the different treatment of, and in the kind of judicial process applied against a group of Christians who had been called to appear before the pagan magistrate. This was described as the work of the malignant demons. In the second part of the first book, Tertullian employs all his rhetorical and judiciary expertise in retaliation (*retorquere*) against those infamous accusations of the crimes (*crimina*) with which Christians were constantly being accused: “*Nunc uero eadem ipsa de nostro corpore (re)uulsa in uos retorquebo, eadem uulnera criminum in uobis defossa monstrabo, quo machaeris uestris admentationibusque cadatis*”.³ The last section of the work comprises the North African theologian’s discussion of the three types of theology that is contained in Varro’s *Antiquitates Rerum Divinarum*. The apologetical work *Ad Nationes* results to be an incomplete task when the end result is compared to what Tertullian had promised to discuss at the outset of the treatise.

Tertullian seems to have composed the work *Apologeticum*⁴ in the winter of 197CE. It is addressed to the governors of this province of the Roman Empire in their task as the competent magistrates in dealing with Christians: “*Romani imperii antistites...praesides*”.⁵ Tertullian presents the work as coming from one who had thought it fit to take upon himself the task of delineating a written and an oral defense of Christianity, a right which had up to now been continually denied to Christians. It is formulated in the mode of a judiciary court procedure. The background set up is wholly fictitious, but has also given the author the advantage of constructing the needed correct humus for his exposition.

In the main part of the treatise, the supposedly *facinora occulta*, occult misdeeds, of Christian morality are examined in great detail. The consequent judicial reproaches, which actually correspond to an exposition of the veracity and truth

2. J.W.P. Borleffs, *CC 1*, Brepols, Turnhout 1954, 9-75.

3. *Ad Nationes* 1, 10, 2: *CC 1*, 24.

4. Eligius Dekkers, *CC 1*, Brepols, Turnhout 1954, 77-171.

5. *Apologeticum* 1,1: *CC 1*, 85; and 2,13: *CC 1*, 89;

(*manifesta*), are then enumerated. In reality, however, these are all meant to make up a negative exposition of the erroneous misconceptions upon which the whole of the accusations of the adversary against Christians have been constructed. The longest section of the treatise is consecrated to an examination of the *manifesta*, which are summed up in the accusation that Christians refuse to give homage to the pagan deities because they do not recognize in them any power to save. On the other hand, they honour the true and only God, the invisible, the incomprehensible who created the whole universe. They also insist that all men ought to have a presentiment of this God and Father of all, as it is of Him, above all, that the soul cries out acknowledging His presence within it, an outcry expressed in that great terse Latin expression of faith: "*O testimonium animae naturaliter Christianae*".⁶

The second part is Tertullian's dealing with a second accusation leveled by pagans against Christians, namely that of *lèse majesté*, that they despise and refuse homage to the Emperor, of treason namely. Christians had already been justly (unjustly rather!) accused of dissenting to believe and express their homage to the non-existent pagan gods; but now the accusation of refusing to acknowledge and of paying homage to the reigning Emperor, was an even more heinous and criminal accusation of their pagan accusers. Christians, Tertullian retorts, are the best citizens ever, in that they adore the only true God who with his grace, upholds the life and limb of the rulers themselves. The earthly life of these rulers, had become one which, on the contrary, was being constantly menaced and brought to a tragic and abrupt end by some of their own faithful subjects. Tertullian finally exclaims: "*Nos ergo soli innocentes*",⁷ Christians are the only rightly and truly innocent subjects of the Empire!

The essay aims at an attempt towards an appreciation of, and a critical evaluation of the theological and sociological implications of the major philanthropic and other religious activities (*negotia*) which the Christian communities Tertullian had come across conducted; activities which he meant to bring to the light of day in defense of the futility and injustice of pagan criticism and persecution of such quiet and law-abiding citizens as Christians turned out to be. These spiritual gatherings were conducted in such a manner so as to encourage Christians to lead a morally correct way of Christian life in all its exacting demands. It is *Apologeticum* 39 the

6. Ib. 17, 6: CC 1, 117.

7. *Apol.* 45, 1: CC 1, 159.

point in which Tertullian delineates the *negotia Christianae*: “*Edam iam nunc ego ipse negotia Christianae factionis, quo minus mala refutauerim, bona ostendam, si etiam ueritatem reuelauerim*”.⁸ This section of the *Apologeticum* has also been entitled *De disciplina Christiana*, in which Tertullian took upon himself the onus of describing in detail the nature and content of all those laudable and beneficent activities that characterized the daily life and liturgy of these early Christian congregations, in spite of the unjust accusations and harassment they underwent at the hands of their persecutors.

Celebrations of unity within Christian communities

The great sense of unity and community that reigned within Christian communities, seemed to have been the vaunt of the majority of Catholic Apologetical literature of the time. Christians appeared to the pagans to form one single cohesive body, *corpus*, or else a *coetus*, or a *congregatio*. These terms, and their innermost connotations, must have been also very well known among pagans. But the *genre* of seemingly similar congregations, or fraternities, in pagan society, was limited to same-sex adherents, male, and who came from the same social standing, and their activity was indeed of a very limited nature, philanthropic mainly. On the other hand, Christians formed one single body, in spite of their coming from diverse social levels; they came together to celebrate from several and distinct communities, but in no way were they reduced or engulfed by any one in particular. Thus, each community retained its local particular characteristics.⁹

In order to elucidate that other aspect of the affirmation, namely, that according to Tertullian, Christian communities in North Africa were indeed very much conscious of the fact that they formed a *corpus*, a body, the North African apologist employed the term *tertium genus*.¹⁰ The expression, however, which can already be read in the *Kerygma Petrou*,¹¹ was originally an expression by which pagans derided Christians, but which, eventually, became one which Christians cherished to assume as it expressed an important aspect of their religious and social identity,

8. Ib. 39, 1: CC 1,150: “*I shall proceed at once to show the peculiarities of this Christian society, that, as I have refuted the evil charged against it, I may also point out the positive aspects*”.

9. For a thorough discussion of the argument of the Pauline significance of the local and global characteristics of these early Church congregations, see Pierre Battifol, *L'Église naissante et le catholicisme*, Éditions du Cerf, Paris 1971, 89-92.

10. *Ad Nationes* 1, 8: CC 1, 21: “*Plane, tertium genus dicimur*”.

11. For the *Teaching of Peter*, see fragments in St Clement of Alexandria, *Tapestries* 6, 5: PG 9, 288.

the novelty of their existence as an *ekklesia*, the New People of God, a race set apart from all the rest.

The novelty in Tertullian's use of the above terms, however, was not in order to emulate the more common finality of similar meetings organized by some pagan corporate societies, in that they met simply in order to feast. The Christian meetings, on the contrary, met in order to witness primarily to their internal cohesion, their unity, and one in expressing they expressed thanks to God in prayers in common: "*Coimus in coetum et congregationem facimus, ut ad Deum quasi manu facta praecationibus ambiamus. Haec est Deo grata est*".¹²

... for the celebration of the reading of the Scriptures and preaching ...

"*Coimus ad litterarum diuinarum commemorationem, si quid praesentium temporum qualitas aut praemonere cogit aut recognoscere...*".¹³ Tertullian describes the major reason for these gatherings, in that before all else, they were meant for praying together. They read and prayed the Sacred Scriptures in order that in them they might find those salutary lessons and teachings. Tertullian too gives us that ancient reason behind the frequent reading of the Catholic Scriptures by Christians, namely, that they might illuminate the moral and disciplinary obligations of Christians. Scriptures thus served the purpose of strengthening and nourishing of the faith (dogmatic), of sustaining the hope and fidelity of Christians, as well as in order to tighten up the ecclesial discipline. The task of this last aim of the reading of the Christian Scriptures was considered to be the enforcement of that *Rule of Conduct*, which, according to the North African apologist was expressed in: "*exhortationes, castigationes, et censura diuina*".¹⁴ The Christian correct moral way of life was expressed by this rule, by this *dogma*. It was in the light of, and on the basis of, this rule of conduct, as well as of faith, that later on these Christian communities would declare some of their adherents guilty of incorrect moral conduct, unworthy of participating in these meetings, and would consequently be *excommunicated*

12. *Apol.* 39, 2: CC I, 150: "We come together as an assembly and congregation, that, offering prayer to God as with united force, we may wrestle with Him in our supplications. This violence God delights in". Similar ideas can also be read in St Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, *First Apology* 65: PG 6,428.

13. *Apol.* 39, 3: CC I, 150.

14. *Apol.* 39, 4: CC I, 150.

from participation of these holy things: “*si quis ita deliquerit, ut a communicatione orationis et conuentus et omnis sancti commercii relegetur*”.¹⁵

The presiding authority during assemblies

The element of Church order throughout these assemblies stands out clearly. It must be emphasized and made clear that according to Tertullian’s description, the celebrations of these Christian assemblies were definitely entrusted to the presidency of *seniores probati*, namely, to some of the more expert elderly priest members of the celebrating Christian community. These were certainly the presbyters as many orthodox Christians in Carthage would have been outraged if a layman had performed such *sacerdotalia munera*.¹⁶ Such men must have also proved their worth thanks to their *testimonium*: “*sed testimonio adepti*”.¹⁷ Tertullian was also indeed extremely cautious to rule out any kind of simony, or other pecuniary elements, involved in the election of these *seniores probati*: “*neque enim pretio ulla res Dei constat*”.¹⁸ In this text he does not delay too much in describing the degree of authority of the presidency of these gatherings. He simply declares that they are baptized elderly and are to be dedicated primarily to the ministry of the word.

Pecuniary administration

The things of God can never be described or measured against pecuniary considerations, Tertullian retorts. The income from the offerings that came from collections during the liturgical celebrations of these sacred gatherings was immediately passed into the common box which known also as the *arca*. From what can be deduced regarding the description of the nature and finality of these collections, it becomes clear that these early Christian communities, in second century North African society, were considered to be operating within the legal framework relevant to the *collegia tenuiorum*, congregations erected for pious purposes such as, for instance, the funerary associations. Ever since the time of the first Christian Roman Emperor, Constantine the Great, these associations or

15. *Ib.*

16. *De praescriptione haereticorum (The prescription against heretics)* 41, 8: CC 1, 222: “*Itaque alius hodie episcopus, cras alius; hodie diaconus qui cras lector; hodie presbyter qui cras laicus. Nam et laicis sacerdotalia munera iniungunt*”.

17. *Apol.* 39, 5: CC 1, 150.

18. *Ib.*

congregations had been tolerated and recognized thanks to a senatorial indult.¹⁹ In the classical work of later Roman imperial jurisprudence known as the *Digesta*, a normative collection of opinions of renowned Roman jurists, compiled under the auspices of the Roman Emperor in the East, Flavius Petrus Sabbatius Justinian (527-565CE) in the year 533CE, it was stated: “*Permittitur tenuioribus stipem menstrum conferre, dum tamen semel in mense coeant, ne sub praetextu huiusmodi illicitum collegium coeat*”.²⁰ “Waltzing in his classic study of *collegia* stopped short of claiming that the government achieved the objective of compulsory ‘unionism’. Membership of a *collegium* was not in fact necessary for the practice of a craft, either in theory or in practice. But Waltzing did hold that all workers’ associations were hereditary attached to some public service from the time of Constantine – the aim being to ensure that vital public functions were performed and essential supplies furnished”.²¹

The only difference, however, but also a great one in the case of Christian collections, was that the donors were not in any way obliged to contribute. They did so out of their own generosity and spontaneously, each and every one was encouraged to contribute, even the smallest possible amount within his poor means. It is also necessary to keep in mind that the rich converts to the Christian faith were expected to contribute heavily towards the coffer for the poor. This collection was known as the *depositum pietatis*, as it was meant only and primarily towards the upkeep of the poorest members of the Christian community:

“These gifts are, as it were, piety’s deposit fund. For they are not taken from it in order to be spent on feasting, and drinking-bouts, and eating-houses, but to support and bury poor people, to supply the wants of boys and girls destitute of means and parents, and of old persons confined not to the house; such, too, as have suffered

19. *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* (136CE) 14,2112,1: “*Kaput ex senatu consulto populi romani: quibus coire collegiumque habere liceat. Qui stipem menstruam conferre uolent in funera, in id collegium coeant conferendi causa unde defuncti sepeliantur*”.
20. Book 47, 22, 1: “*It is allowed for societies to collect money monthly, on condition that they meet once a month, and do so for no illicit purposes*”, see also J.A.C. Thomas, *The Institutes of Justinian*, London 1975. See also the work of J.-P. Waltzing, *Étude Historique sur les corporations professionnelles chez les romains depuis les origines jusqu’à la chute de l’empire d’occident*, Louvain 1896.
21. P. Garnsey – C.R. Whittaker, “Trade, Industry and the Urban Economy”, in, *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 13. The Late Empire, A.D. 337-425, University Press, Cambridge 1998, 318.

*shipwreck; and if there happen to any in the mines, or banished to the islands, or shut up in the prisons, for nothing but their fidelity to the cause of God's Church, they become the nurslings of their confession".*²²

That money could only be directed and spent for charitable causes. Literary proof for one of these afore-mentioned cases that would be alleviated thanks to these collections, can be read in the account of the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*:

*Then Tertius and Pomponius, the blessed deacons who ministered to us, obtained with money that for a few hours we should be taken forth to a better part of the prison and be refreshed. Then all of them going out from the dungeon took their pleasure; I suckled my child that was now faint with hunger. And being careful for him, I spoke to my mother and strengthened my brother and commended my son unto them. I pined because I saw they pined for my sake. Such cares I suffered for many days; and I obtained that the child should abide with me in prison; and straightway I became well and was lightened of my labour and care for the child; and suddenly the prison was made a palace for me, so that I would sooner be there than anywhere else".*²³

It was the practical aspect of Christian charity that actually enraged the pagans most!

Other aspects of Christian charity

It is this novel aspect of Christian charity that Tertullian underlined, and described in all its details, accompanied with all the typical vehemence of his expressions. It was also this aspect, rather peculiar to Christianity, which vexed the pagans all the more as they saw in it the basic moving force behind their unity and togetherness: "*Vide, iniquiunt, ut inuicem se diligent*".²⁴ In the same sentence, the

22. *Apol.* 39, 6; CC 1.151: "*Haec quasi deposita pietatis sunt. Quippe non epulis inde nec potaculis nec ingratis uoratrinis dispensantur, sed egenis alendis humanisque et pueris ac paellas re ac parentibus destituis [iamque] domesticis senibus iam otiosis, item naufragis, et si qui in metallis et si qui in insulis uel in custodies, diuntaxat ex causa Dei sectae, alumni confessionis sua fiunt*".

23. J.A. Robinson, *The Passion of S. Perpetua (Texts and Studies 1, 2)*, Cambridge 1891.

24. *Apol.* 39, 7: "*See, they would retort, how they love one another*": CC 1.151.

African theologian engaging his mastery of the Latin language to its utmost, and in his typical method of contrasting and reconciling seemingly contradictory aspects, describes this uncommon and unconceivable love of Christians for one another in the words: "...for themselves they are animated by mutual hatred; how they are ready even to die for one another, for they themselves will sooner be put to death".²⁵ The other fact that Christians addressed one another as *brethren, fratres*, an aspect of their love for one another, however, became one of the most displeasing element which brought upon them all the hatred of their malign enemies who showered on them all kinds of accusations of debauchery and licentiousness practiced during their evening meetings. Tertullian countered this accusation thanks to his recourse to the fundamental underlying aspect of the unity of Christians in one Church, namely, that enhanced thanks to their adoption by God as His children, in Christ Jesus: "*At the same time, how much more fittingly they are called and counted brothers who have been led to the knowledge of God as their common Father, who have drunk in one spirit of holiness, who from the same womb of a common ignorance, have agonized into the same light of truth!*"²⁶

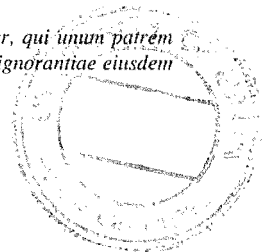
The significance of the description of the above Trinitarian union is the basis for that communality aspect that is expected to be imitated by each and every one: this is, however, not a description solely of a community of belongings, but of that free and generous use by all, of all that one disposes of: "*Omnia indiscreta sunt apud nos...*"; this harkens also that famous dictum that among friends everything ought to be in common:

*"But on this very account, perhaps, we are regarded as having less claim to be held true brothers, that no tragedy makes a noise about our brotherhood, or that the family possessions, which generally destroy brotherhood among you, create fraternal bonds among us. One in mind and soul, we do not hesitate to share our earthly goods with one another. All things are common among us".*²⁷

25. Ib. 8: CC 1,151: "...*ipsi enim inuicem oderunt; et ut pro alterutro mori sint parati, ipsi enim ad occidendum alterutrum paratiores*".

26. *Apol.* 39, 9: CC 1,151: "*Quanto nunc dignus fratres et dicuntur et habentur, qui unum patrem Deum agnouerunt, qui unum spiritum biberunt sanctitatis, qui de uno utero ignorantiae eiusdem ad unam lucem expauerunt ueritatis?*"

27. Ib. 39, 11: CC 1,151.



Tertullian does not refrain however, from inserting that lapidary proviso: that among Christian all is held in common... except wives "*praeter uxores*". Tertullian embarks here upon a long apologetical invective against those notorious and illicit hated pagan customs in the sphere of conjugal morality:

"We give up our community where it is practiced alone by others, who not only take possession of the wives of their friends, but most tolerantly also accommodate their friends with theirs, following the example, I believe, of those wise men of ancient times, the Greek Socrates and the Roman Cato, who shared with their friends the wives whom they had married, it seems for the sake of progeny both to themselves and to others; whether in this acting against their partners' wishes, I am not able to say. Why should they have any care over their chastity, when their husbands so readily bestowed it away? O noble example of Attic wisdom, of Roman gravity—the philosopher and the censor playing pimps!"²⁸

Agape meetings

Tertullian then proceeds to describe those Christian meetings which express the sublime aspect of that unity which he is taking pains to discuss against pagan accusations. These meals in common were known as *cenulae*. He intends primarily to draw out the details and describe the validity and holiness of these sacred meals from the religious point of view, namely as Christian *agape* meetings. In the description of these gatherings, Tertullian seems to want to distinguish them from the celebration of the Eucharist. Even though, however, the Eucharist did take place during these *agape* celebrations. Thanks to a famous letter of the pagan Roman governor of

28. *Apol.* 39,12-13: CC 1,151-152: *"In isto loco consortium soluimus, in quo solo ceteri homines consortium exercent, qui non amicorum solummodo matrimonia usurpant, sed et sua amicis patientissime subministrant, ex illa, credo, maiorum et sapientiorum suorum disciplina, Graeci Socratis et Romani Catonis, qui uxores suas amicis communicauerunt, quas in matrimonium duxerant liberorum causa et alibi creandorum. Nescio quidem an inuitas: quid enim de castitate curarent, quam mariti tam facile donauerunt? O sapientiae Atticae, o Romanae grauitatis exemplum: leno est philosophus et censor!"*

Bithynia, a certain Pliny the Younger,²⁹ to his emperor, Trajan,³⁰ we have a detailed description of the daily life of second-century Christians. In *Letter 96*, addressed to Trajan, Pliny speaks of two daily meetings of Christians, one which took place in the morning, probably the *antelucani coetus* of which Tertullian speaks, and the other evening meeting, in which the *agape* was celebrated. Pliny reported that:

“...they had met regularly before dawn on a fixed day to chant verses alternately among themselves in honour of Christ as if to a god...after this ceremony it had been their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of an ordinary, harmless kind...”³¹

Pliny also reported that upon examination, accompanied by harsh methods of investigation, of those seemingly innocent practices, in spite of persecution, the majority of these Christians were ready to abandon the first practice, but categorically refused to do so as regards the second.

The details of Tertullian’s description of the celebration of these Eucharistic meals recorded from early Christianity also conform to those given by Hippolytus of Rome,³² in the *Canons* drawn up by him.³³ Before and after these meals, it was to be kept in mind that all through, God was to be invoked and adored, before as well as after, and all through the night He was to be invoked and adored. After, there followed the ritual of the washing of hands and the reading of texts from Sacred Scripture or else improvised spontaneous prayer, as well as singing. From the description forwarded of the celebration of the *agape* from some early Christian

29. Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundinus born in 62CE and died towards the year 114CE, was born in Como, Italy. He studied law in Rome under Quintilian and made a brilliant legal career in the City. He was also befriended to Tacitus and was finally given the imperial charge of one of the Roman Provinces, Bithynia-Pontus. Pliny delivered a famous panegyric in honour of Emperor Trajan. Of all of Pliny’s works there are still 247 *Private Letters* extant. The more notorious of them was *Letter 10* to Trajan, against Christians.

30. Pagan Roman Emperor Marcus Ulpius Nerva Traianus born on the 18th of September 53CE and died on the 9th of August 117CE. He ruled the Empire between 98CE and 117CE, he is commonly known as Trajan, and was the second of the *Five Good Emperors* of the Roman Empire. Under his rule, the Empire reached its greatest territorial extent.

31. *Letter 96*, 7-9: “...quod essent soliti stato die ante lucem convenire, carmenque Christo quasi deo dicere...rursusque coeundi ad capiendum cibum”.

32. A Christian priest who lived and worked in Rome during the first half of the third century CE.

33. H. Achelis, *Die ältesten Quellen des orientalischen Kirchenrechtes*. I. Die “*Canones Hippolyti*,” in, *Texte und Untersuchungen* 6, 4, Berlin 1891 (see *Canones* 32, 164 – 35,185: 105-111).

sources, it seems to have been therefore a meal during which one consumed food according to his appetite: “*editur quantum esurientes capiunt; bibitur quantum pudicis utile est*”.³⁴ The meal was celebrated towards the end of the day, and after which everyone returns to his home conscious of having rather fulfilled one’s duties (*disciplina*) than of having simply dined: “*Inde desceditur non in cateruas caesionum nec in classes discursationum nec in inceptionses lacuiarum, sed ad eandem curam modestiae et pudicitiae, ut qui non tam cenam cenauerunt quam disciplinam*”.³⁵

Tertullian refuted the pagan accusation of any kind of intemperance in the consumption of food; as a matter of fact, the poor as those who benefited from all of it at the end of the day. The accusation of any secrecy involved in the location of the *rendevous*, or of immodesty or indecency of behaviour involved in this innocent consumption of food by Christians in common, is also strongly rebutted by Tertullian in the words: “*Haec coitio Christianorum merito sane illicita, si illicitis par, merito sane damnanda. Si non dissimilis damnandis, si quis de ea queritur eo titulo, quo de factionibus querela est*”.³⁶ Tertullian does not hesitate to admit and make it clear the fact that these gatherings are also regulated by the *disciplina Christiana*, which was extremely important and necessary; it appears that this must have been also one of the bones of contention with pagans. He retorted that anyone failing to observe these rules of conduct, risked the heavy punishment of exclusion from the community (excommunication): “*Sed dicet aliquis, etiam de nostris excidere quosdam a regula disciplinae*”.³⁷

Conclusion

This study and analysis of chapter 39 of the *Apologeticum* has revealed some salient aspects of the daily Christian life and practice of second century Christianity as regards the role of the *presbyter*, the prayers preceding and following of their *agape* and Eucharistic meetings, as well as the kind of charitable assistance to the needy as a show of social cohesion.

The text has also revealed the kind of ingenious technique in the defense of Christian piety against pagan accusations, which Tertullian had opted for, thanks, namely, to a kind of a positive and a negative exposition of his ecclesiological

34. *Apol.* 39,17: CC 1,152.

35. *Ib.* 39, 19: CC 1,153.

36. *Ib.* 39, 20: CC 1,153.

37. *Ib.* 46, 17: CC 1,162.

ideas, which, at the same time, underlined the role of that unique unity between the militant Church on earth, reflecting also the Church of the One and Triune True God of Christianity.

Tertullian shows how the Church is the society of the Christian faithful, and which saw the light of day on the day of Pentecost.³⁸ It is also *apostolic* by origin, and its distinctive marks are those of faithfulness to its origins, and the community of the faithful as adopted children of God in Jesus Christ. Tertullian harped on the note of *catholicity*, namely of universality, of the Catholic Church.³⁹ He also invoked the solidity of the principle of social cohesion as reflecting the disciplinary aspect of unity of belief and of Christian hope.

Tertullian was also the first Christian Writer to have brought out in all its force the idea of the *mystery* which the Church reveals to be. Thanks to his vivid esoteric writing, he succeeded in underlining all the aspects of the vitality of that form of love which characterized all of the Christian forms of celebration of these early Christian North African communities which he had come across. Tertullian thus explained to their pagan accusers the importance of these Eucharistic assemblies of Christians, known as *cenae*, or *agape*. As it has already been noted above in the discussion of the text from *The Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*, it was also thanks to these celebrations whence Christian martyrs had obtained such kind of great courage and heavenly comfort to meet their final struggles with the devil in the form of gladiators against whom they were about to battle. This resulted in the enormous show of courage and lack of fear on the part of Christians, in face of such harsh torture that awaited them, and which had proved to be wholly incomprehensible to their pagan persecutors. It must also be noted, however, that after Tertullian had passed over to Montanism,⁴⁰ he reproached Christians with dietary intemperance in the practice of such meals, especially considering that it was the case of their last meal before being condemned for supplication, a practice therefore, which could

38. *Praesc.* 22, 11: CC 1, 204.

39. See also other texts in this regard, for instance, *Praesc.* 26: CC 1, 208: "*quam catholicae in medium proferebant*"; and *Aduersus Marcionem (Against Marcion)* 2, 17, 1: CC 2, 494.

40. A heresy which arose around 172CE in Phrygia, Asia Minor. It was founded by a certain Montanus, a recent convert to Christianity, who, it was claimed, had uttered prophecies during trances, predicting the imminent descent of the heavenly Jerusalem at the village of Pepuza in Phrygia. As a result, he strongly urged his devotees to assemble there, to practice rigorous fasting, and to contribute sums of money towards a common fund.

have easily involved the risk of weakening their resistance.⁴¹

Finally, in this text, Tertullian has also enlightened us as to the nature of some of the more original religious cults practiced, and the nature of the texture of the social customs of these early Christian communities in the midst of a pagan world and regime in Roman North Africa in the second and third centuries CE.

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41. See *De Ieiunio (Aduersus psychicos) (On fasting)* 12, 2-3: *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, 20 (G. Reifferscheid – G. Wissowa, Vienna 1890), 290: “...sed ad praemiendam per nosmet ipsos nouissimorum temporum condicionem indicentes omnem g-tapeinophronēsin, cum carcer ediscendus et fames ac sitis exercendae et tam inediae quam anxii uictus tolerantia usurpanda sit, ut in carcerem talis introeat christianus, qualis inde prodissit, non poenam illic passurus, sed disciplinam, nec saeculi tormenta, sed sua officia, eo que fidentior processurus ad certamen e custodia abusus nihil habens carnis, sic ut nec habeant tormenta materiam, cum sola et arida sit cute loricated, et contra ungulas corneus, praemisso iam sanguinis suco tamquam animae impedimentis, properante iam et ipsa, quae iam saepe ieiunans mortem de proximo norit. 3. Plane uestrum est in carceribus popinas exhibere martyribus incertis, ne consuetudinem quaerant, ne taedeat uitae, ne noua abstinentiae disciplina scandalizentur, quam nec ille pristinus uester non Christianus martyr adtigerat, quem ex facultate custodiae liberae aliquamdiu fartum, omnibus balneis quasi baptismate melioribus et omnibus luxuriae secessibus quasi ecclesia secretioribus et omnibus uitae istius inlecebris quasi aeterna dignioribus hoc puto obligatum, ne mori uellet, postremo ipso tribunalis die luce summa condito mero tamquam antidoto praemedicatum ita eneruastis, ut paucis unguulis titillatus (hoc enim ebrietas sentiebat) quem dominum confiteretur interroganti praesidi respondere non potuerit amplius, atque ita de hoc iam extortus, cum singultus et ructus solos haberet, in ipsa negatione discessit.” (“...enjoining every species of ταπεινοφρονῆσις, since the prison must be familiarized to us, and hunger and thirst practiced, and capacity of enduring as well the absence of food as anxiety about it acquired: in order that the Christian may enter into prison in like condition as if he had (just) come forth of it,—to suffer there not penalty, but discipline, and not the world’s tortures, but his own habitual observances; and to go forth out of custody to (the final) conflict with all the more confidence, having nothing of sinful false care of the flesh about him, so that the tortures may not even have material to work on, since he is cuirassed in a mere dry skin, and cased in horn to meet the claws, the succulence of his blood already sent on (heavenward) before him, the baggage as it were of his soul,—the soul herself withal now hastening (after it), having already, by frequent fasting, gained a most intimate knowledge of death! 3. Plainly, your habit is to furnish cookshops in the prisons to untrustworthy martyrs, for fear they should miss their accustomed usages, grow weary

of life, (and) be stumbled at the novel discipline of abstinence; (a discipline) which not even the well-known Pristinus – your martyr, no Christian martyr - had ever come in contact with: he whom - stuffed as he had long been, thanks to the facilities afforded by the “free custody” (now in vogue, and) under an obligation, I suppose, to all the baths (as if they were better than baptism!), and to all the retreats of voluptuousness (as if they were more secret than those of the Church!), and to all the allurements of this life (as if they were of more worth than those of life eternal!), not to be willing to die - on the very last day of trial, at high noon, you premedicated with drugged wine as an antidote, and so completely enervated, that on being tickled—for his intoxication made it feel like tickling - with a few claws, he was unable any more to make answer to the presiding officer interrogating him “whom he confessed to be Lord;” and, being now put on the rack for this silence, when he could utter nothing but hiccoughs and belchings, died in the very act of apostasy!”).