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Excerpt

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Christianity and citizenship

Letters 90, 91, 103 and 104

The following exchange of letters between Augustine and Nectarius is concerned with a riot which took place during illegal pagan celebrations in Calama, Nectarius' home-town, not far from Hippo. Nectarius urges Augustine to intervene to protect his fellow-pagans from legal penalties.

Letter 90

408

Nectarius¹ to his notable lord and deservedly welcome brother,
the bishop Augustine.

I need not describe the power of patriotic love, for you know it already: it alone could justly take precedence over affection for our parents. If a good man's service of his home-town had any limit or terminus, then by now I might deserve to excuse myself worthily from my duties to her. On the contrary, though, one's affection and gratitude for one's city grows as each day passes; and the nearer life approaches to its end, the more one desires to leave one's country flourishing and secure. That is why I am delighted before all else to be conducting this discussion with a man who is thoroughly well educated.

There are many things about the colony of Calama which deservedly win my affection: I was born there, and I have – it seems – discharged public duties of some significance on its behalf.² Now, my most excellent and deservedly welcome lord, the colony has lapsed through the serious misbehaviour of her populace.³ Now it is indeed true that if we weigh matters according to strict public law, then quite a harsh sentence ought to be inflicted. But a bishop is sanctioned only to provide security for people, to stand in court on the more deserving side of the case, and to win mercy before almighty God for the misdeeds of others.⁴ My request,

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therefore, and my urgent plea, is that if the case must be defended, you will defend those not responsible, and protect the innocent from trouble.

Please do this; as you can well see, it is a request that suits your character. A limit for damages can easily be set; we simply beg to be spared the criminal penalty.⁵

May you live to please God more and more, notable lord and deservedly welcome brother.

Letter 91

408/409

Augustine to his distinguished lord and justly honoured brother Nectarius.¹

(1) I am not surprised that your heart still glows with such warm love for your home-town, even though your limbs are now starting to be chilled by old age, and I praise you for this. Furthermore, I am not reluctant, but rather delighted, to see you not only recalling accurately, but also showing by your life and your behaviour, that ‘a good man’s service of his home-town has no limit or terminus’.² That is why we should love to count you too as a citizen of a certain country beyond; it is because we love *that* country with a holy love – as far as we can – that we accept hard work and danger among the people we hope to benefit by helping them reach it. If you were, you would consider there to be ‘no limit or terminus’ to the service of the small group of its citizens who are pilgrims on this earth; and in discharging your duties to a much finer city [cf. Heb 11.16], you would become so much finer a man. If you set no end to your efforts to serve that city for the present time, you would find no end to your enjoyment of her everlasting peace.

(2) Until this happens, however – we need not despair of the possibility of your finding that home-town, and perhaps even now you are wisely contemplating the prospect. After all, your father preceded you there, after giving you life here – but until this happens, forgive us if we cause some unhappiness to your home-town, which you are eager to leave flourishing, for the sake of our home-town, which we are eager never to leave.³ We might argue with your wise self about its flourishing; but we should not worry that it will be difficult to persuade you how a city ought

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to flourish – I am sure that will be easily obvious to you. The most famous poet in your literary tradition has mentioned the ‘flowers’ of Italy.⁴ However, in your home-town we have had less experience of the land ‘in flower’ with heroes, than ‘alight with weapons’; or perhaps I should say, not ‘alight with weapons’, but ‘consumed with flames’. Do you think that leaving an outrage like that to go unpunished, or failing to reform the guilty as they deserve, will allow you to leave your homeland ‘flourishing’? Flowers like that won’t produce fruit, but thorns [cf. Mt 7.16; Lk 6.43–4]! Compare the choices: would you prefer your home-town to flower with piety or with licence, with reformed characters, or with atrocities unchecked? Compare the choices, and see whether your love for your home-town surpasses ours, and whether you, or we, are more fully and genuinely eager for it to flourish.

(3) Think a little about those volumes *On the Republic* (that was where you imbibed your devoted citizen’s attitude that ‘a good man’s service of his home-town has no limit or terminus’).⁵ Please think about them; notice how they proclaim as praiseworthy simplicity and restraint, along with faithfulness to the marriage bond, and behaviour that is chaste and honourable and upright.⁶ When a city is strong in such virtues as these, then it can truly be said to be ‘flourishing’. In fact, though, such behaviour is being taught and learnt in the churches that are springing up all over the globe, like sacred lecture halls for the peoples of the world. Above all, they learn of the reverence that consists of worshipping the true and truthful God. All these virtues, which educate the human spirit and fit it for fellowship with God and for living in the everlasting city of heaven, he not only commands us to seek, but also enables us to acquire. That is why he predicted that the idols of the many false gods would be overthrown, and in fact ordered that they should be [cf. Lev 26.30; Ezek 6.4, 30.13; Hos 10.2; Num 35.52; 1 Kgs 15.12–13; 2 Chron 23.17, 31.15, 34.3–4]. For nothing renders people so unfit for human fellowship by corrupting their lives as imitating the gods in the way their characters are described (and recommended!) in their literature.

(4) When, then, our learned gentlemen were discussing the republic and the earthly city, and what they thought it ought to be like (and, incidentally, they sought it, and indeed described it, in private discussions, rather than actually founding and shaping it through public activity),⁷ they did not offer the gods as examples for forming the characters of the young. Rather, they suggested men whom they considered outstanding and praiseworthy. Certainly Terence’s young man, who looked at a wall-

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painting depicting the king of the gods indulging in adultery,⁸ found the feeling of lust which overcame him further inflamed when spurred by so authoritative an example. He would not have slipped into being tempted to his shocking deed, or sunk into perpetrating it, if he had chosen to imitate Cato rather than Jupiter! But how could he have done that, when in the temples he was compelled to worship Jupiter rather than Cato?

Perhaps, though, we oughtn't to offer examples like this from comedy to convict the impious of over-indulgence and idolatrous superstition. Read, or remind yourself, how the same volumes wisely argue that the words and the plots of comedies could not have been welcomed except by people whose characters corresponded to them.⁹ Therefore these renowned gentlemen, who were outstanding in public life, when they were debating the republic lent their authority to the claim that depraved people become worse by imitating those gods, who are certainly not true, but false and fictional.¹⁰

(5) 'But', you might object, 'all the ancient written traditions about the gods' lives and characters ought to be understood and interpreted by wise readers in quite a different way'.¹¹ Yes indeed; just yesterday or the day before, we heard a wholesome interpretation of this sort being read out in the temples to the assembled people. I ask you: is the human race so blinded to the truth that it cannot grasp such clear and obvious facts? Jupiter is celebrated everywhere committing his acts of adultery: in paintings, in statues – cast, hammered or sculpted – in writing, in public readings, on the stage, in song, in dance. Why could he not have been described as prohibiting such behaviour, at least on his own Capitol?¹² If such wicked, such completely shameless and impious acts are allowed to blaze without prohibition among the people; if they are worshipped in the temples and laughed at in the theatres; if even the poor man's herds are wiped out as his animals become their sacrificial victims; and if the rich man's inheritance is squandered on actors to imitate them in plays and in dances – then, how can you say that the cities are 'flourishing'?

The proper mother of such 'flowers' is not the fertile earth; nor is it some opulent virtue. No, it is the goddess Flora: they celebrate in her honour a dramatic festival of such extravagant and unbridled shockingness that anyone can grasp the kind of demon she is;¹³ she is not appeased by the deaths of birds or mammals or even human blood, but by nothing less than the sacrificial death, as it were, of human decency – a far greater outrage!¹⁴

(6) I am saying all this in response to your writing that in as much as you are nearing the end of your life you are eager to leave your home-town

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safe and flourishing. If so, all this deceitful idiocy must be done away with, and people must be converted to a true worship of God and to chaste and pious habits. Then you will be able to see your home-town flourishing, not merely in the opinion of fools, but in the true judgement of the wise. Then this home-town of the flesh where you were born will have become a part of the homeland into which we are born not physically, but by faith; there everyone who is holy and faithful to God will flower in everlasting eternity after their labours in the winter, as it were, of this life.

In short, we dearly wish not to abandon Christian gentleness; but also to avoid leaving any destructive examples in the city for others to imitate. God will be with us in doing this, if he is not too seriously angry with them. But perhaps obstacles will hinder both the gentleness that we are eager to preserve and the correction that we struggle to apply with moderation; for some other course may be pleasing to the hidden will of God. Perhaps he may judge that so great an evil ought to be punished by a harsher flogging; or if his anger is still fiercer, he may want to leave them unpunished in this life, so that they are not reformed and converted to him.

(7) Your wise self outlines for us something of a bishop's role, stating that your 'home-town has lapsed through the serious misbehaviour of her populace'. 'It is true indeed', you say, 'that if we weigh matters according to strict public law, then quite a harsh sentence ought to be inflicted. But a bishop is sanctioned only to provide security for people, to stand in court on the more deserving side of the case, and to win mercy before almighty God for the misdeeds of others.' In general we try to keep it the case that no one is punished too severely either by us or by anyone else with whom we might intercede; and we are eager to provide security for people. Security, however, lies in the happy condition of living rightly rather than in being safe to act wrongly. We also apply ourselves to winning mercy not only for our own misdeeds, but also for others'; but we can only achieve this on behalf of those who have been reformed. You also add the words, 'My request, therefore, and my urgent plea, is that if the case must be defended, you will defend those not responsible, and protect the innocent from trouble.'

(8) Listen briefly to what was done, and you yourself distinguish between innocent and guilty. In contravention of very recent laws an idolatrous ritual was celebrated on a pagan feast-day, the first of June.¹⁵ No one prevented it; and it was performed with quite shameless bravado: an

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outrageous group of dancers crossed right into the street where the church is and right up in front of it – something that did not happen even in Julian's time! When the clergy tried to prevent this utterly illegal and quite inappropriate behaviour, they threw stones at the church.

Next, about eight days later, the bishop made a formal appeal before the civic authorities to the very well-known laws,¹⁶ and while they were arranging to implement the instructions of those laws, the church was stoned a second time. By the next day, our people's hope of deterring them by threats seemed vain; and we were denied our public rights when we wanted to speak on record for the official proceedings.¹⁷ On the very same day a shower of hail fell in response to their hail of stones; perhaps they might at least fear the gods! But as soon as it was over, they immediately stoned the church for the third time, and then finally set the church roof on fire along with some of its personnel. One of the servants of God who lost his way and ran into them, they killed. The rest hid where they could or fled where they could; the bishop meanwhile was hiding, squashed in some cramped corner, and he heard the voices of men who were hunting him to kill him; they were reproaching themselves on the grounds that their outrages would have been committed for nothing if they failed to find him.

All this was happening from early evening¹⁸ until late into the night. Not one person who might have carried weight and influence among them tried to control them, or to provide relief; none, that is, except for one foreigner. He enabled many of the servants of God to escape the hands of the men who were set on killing them, and he also forced the looters to return a lot of property. This man made it obvious how easily those events might have been prevented or nipped in the bud, if the citizens, and especially their leaders,¹⁹ had intervened to stop them at the start or before the end.

(9) It might not be possible, then, for you to distinguish the innocent from the guilty out of the whole city, but only the less guilty from the more guilty. Certainly those who merely lacked the courage to offer help were guilty only of a minor sin; and in particular if they were deterred by fear of offending those powerful men in the town whom they knew to be enemies of the church. However, everyone was implicated in the outrages that were committed with their consent, even if they neither took part in them nor instigated them. Those who actually committed them are implicated more deeply; and those who instigated them most deeply of all. We ought, though, to treat the suggestions about the instigators as

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suspicions rather than truth, and avoid discussing matters that can only be brought to light at the cost of torturing those who must be interrogated.²⁰

We should also be merciful to those who are afraid, even if they have chosen to beg mercy from God on account of his bishop and his servants, rather than to offend the powerful enemies of the church. As for those who are left, do you really reckon that they should not be disciplined and restrained? Do you really think that we should offer such an example of appalling savagery to be allowed to go unpunished? We have no desire to nurse our anger by taking revenge over events that are past; rather we try to act mercifully with an eye to the future. There are ways of punishing evil men that are not only gentle, but even for their benefit and well-being, and Christians too can make use of these. They have been given three benefits: a life of bodily health; the means of staying alive; and the means with which to live badly. Let them keep the first two safe; in that way there will still be some potential penitents.²¹ We pray for this, and we spare no possible effort in working for it. If God wishes to excise the third of these, as if it were a gangrenous and poisonous growth, then certainly he will, in his mercy, inflict punishment. If he wishes something more than this, or if he does not allow even this much – well, then, the rationale of his policy, which will be still more profound and, undoubtedly, more just, remains with him.

As for us, we must weigh our responsibility and our duty (as far as it is given to us to see it) beseeching him that our intentions may meet with his approval – for we intend and wish to act in the best interests of everyone – and that he may allow nothing to be done through our agency that might – as he would know far better than us – disadvantage both us and his church.

(10) When I went to Calama recently²² to console those who were suffering because of this sorry and serious matter, and to calm those who were angry, I settled as well as I could with the Christians the courses of action that I judged most appropriate in the circumstances. After this, I received the pagans also, the source and cause of all this trouble, who had asked me to make myself available to them. I did so in order to advise them what it would be sensible for them to do in this situation, not only to relieve themselves of their present anxieties, but also to seek everlasting security. They listened for a long time, and they also spent a long time questioning us. Far be it from us, though, to be the kind of servants who are delighted to receive requests from people who are unwilling to make requests of our Lord.

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You can see clearly, then – for your mind is still very lively! – that we must (while preserving gentleness and Christian moderation) make an effort in this affair to deter others from imitating the culprits' wickedness, or even to pray that others will imitate them once they are reformed. The losses that were inflicted are either being borne by Christians, or made good by Christians. The profits that we desire are souls: we are so eager to secure them that we are ready to risk shedding our own blood; we long for these profits to increase in your town, and not to be hampered in other places by your example.²³

May the mercy of God allow us to rejoice over your security!

Letter 103

409

Nectarius sends greetings in the Lord to Augustine his justly and deservedly welcome lord and brother worthy of every type of honour.

(1) I read the letter sent by your distinguished self, with its assault on the worship of idols and the temple rituals. While doing so, I did not seem to be hearing the voice of the well-known philosopher who, they tell us, used to sit on the ground in some dark corner in the Academy's lyceum, sunk in some deep thought, with his head bent and his knees drawn up to his forehead, a sort of poverty-stricken critic, trying to attack the notable teachings other people had discovered and to find fault with their notable propositions, though he had nothing of his own to defend.¹ No – instead the *consularis*² Marcus Tullius Cicero was summoned by your eloquence and stood before my eyes; he it was who saved the lives of countless of his fellow-citizens and then, crowned as a victor, carried the victory standards from the battleground of the law-courts into the astonished schools of the Greeks; next he redirected his clarion, that sonorous voice and the tongue with which he had blasted guilty criminals and the parricides of his republic, and panting with the breath of righteous indignation, he flung back his toga itself, imitating the appearance of the folds of the Greek *pallium* in his flowing pages.³

(2) I was happy to listen, therefore, when you were pressing me towards

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the worship and religion of the most high God. I gratefully welcomed your effort to persuade me to attend to our heavenly homeland. I did not take you to be speaking of the city that is enclosed by a circle of walls, nor of the city that philosophers' treatises call 'world-wide', and declare to be common to all.⁴ Rather, you were talking about a city where the great God lives and dwells, along with those souls that truly deserve it, a city that is the goal at which all laws aim, by various paths and ways, a city that we cannot fully describe in speech, but can perhaps discover by contemplation.⁵ This, therefore, should be our principal goal and our principal love.

However that may be, I do not think that we need to abandon the city in which we were born and brought into life, which first granted us the enjoyment of the light we see, which nourished us and brought us up; furthermore (to say what is specifically appropriate to the issue) for those heroes whose fine service to the city merits it, a home is being prepared in heaven – so the philosophers tell us – for after their bodily deaths.⁶ In this way, the people who have served the town of their birth well are promoted to the city above; the people who are shown to have secured safety for their own homeland, by their advice or their efforts, are the ones who will live closer to God.

My next point is this: you thought to make a joke about our city burning not with arms, but with fire and flames, and growing thorns rather than flowers.⁷ But that is not a very great criticism. After all, we know that flowers often grow from thorns. Everyone is aware that roses sprout from thorns and that even the fruit of corn is surrounded by a ring of spiky ears. In fact, pleasant and painful things are usually mingled together like this.⁸

(3) The final point in the letter from your excellent self was that the church does not demand in retribution either life or bloodshed. Rather, the guilty should be stripped of the possessions they are most afraid of losing. In my judgement (if my view is not mistaken) it is a more serious thing to be stripped of resources than to be killed. That is true at least if death entirely removes our perception of evil, while a life of poverty produces endless misfortune – claims which, as you know, are frequently found in literature.⁹ It is a more serious matter to live a life full of evils than to put an end to those evils by dying. In fact, the principles behind your own work reveal this: you support the poor, care for the sick to ease their sufferings, administer medicine to those in bodily pain, and, in short, do everything possible to prevent the afflicted from suffering long-lasting misfortune.

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Now in respect of the degree of sin, it makes no difference what kind of a sin has led to an appeal for leniency. In the first place, if repentance is able both to win mercy and to atone for the offence itself, then surely everyone who throws his arms around your feet and begs for pardon is repentant. Furthermore, if (as some philosophers agree) all sins are equal, then pardon ought to be granted in common to all.¹⁰ If someone has spoken a little rudely, he has sinned. If he heaps abuse or accusations on you, he has sinned equally. If one person has stolen another's property, this should also be counted a misdeed. If he has violated secular places or sacred, still he should not be cut off from pardon. In the end, there is no room for mercy, unless sins are committed first.

(4) I have now replied for better or for worse, as they say, not as well as I ought, but as well as I could. Therefore, I beg and beseech you – if only you could be here to see my tears as well – I beg you to think again and again who you are, what you profess, and what you are doing, and to focus your attention on the sight of the city, as these people are dragged away from her to be led to punishment.

Imagine the grief of their mothers and their wives, of their children and their parents. Imagine the shame with which they must return to their home-town, set free, but only after torture. And thinking about their wounds and their scars will renew their pain and their tears. When you have studied all these points carefully, please think first of God and then consider your reputation among human beings, or rather the goodness of a friend and the bonds forged by affection. And then, please, win yourself praise for offering pardon and not retribution.

All that might already be said in the case of those who stand truly accused, implicated by their own confession.¹¹ To these people you have granted mercy, through reflection on the law;¹² I never fail to praise you for this. Now, though, it is almost impossible to explain how cruel it is to chase the innocent, and to summon to judgement on a capital charge those whom everyone agrees not to have been involved in the crime. Even if it happens that they are exonerated, please consider how they will win their freedom at the cost of hatred against their accusers, as having voluntarily allowed the guilty to go free, but left the innocent alone only once they had lost their case.¹³

May the highest God keep you safe and preserve you as a stronghold of his law and a jewel in our crown.