

AUGUSTINE POLITICAL WRITINGS

EDITED BY

E. M. ATKINS

Trinity and All Saints College, Leeds

AND

R. J. DODARO

Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, Rome



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK www.cup.cam.ac.uk
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA www.cup.org
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

© in the selection, translation and editorial matter Cambridge University Press 2001

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2001

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Ehrhardt MT 9.5/12pt *System* QuarkXPress® [SE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

ISBN 0 521 44172 2 hardback

ISBN 0 521 44607 X paperback

Contents

<i>Editors' note</i>	page ix
<i>Introduction</i>	xi
<i>Translator's notes</i>	xxviii
<i>Principal dates</i>	xxxii
<i>Bibliography</i>	xli
<i>Map of Augustine's north Africa</i>	li

CHRISTIANITY AND CITIZENSHIP

Letter 90: Nectarius to Augustine (408)	1
Letter 91: Augustine to Nectarius (408/409)	2
Letter 103: Nectarius to Augustine (409)	8
Letter 104: Augustine to Nectarius (409)	11
Letter 95: Augustine to Paulinus of Nola and Therasia (408)	22
Letter 136: Marcellinus to Augustine (411/412)	28
Letter 138: Augustine to Marcellinus (411/412)	30
Letter 10*: Augustine to Alypius (428)	43
Letter 250: Augustine to Auxilius (412 or 427–30)	47
Letter 1*: Augustine to Classicianus (412 or 427–30)	50
Sermon 335C: On the feast of a martyr	53

Contents

BISHOPS AND CIVIL AUTHORITIES

Letter 133: Augustine to Marcellinus (411)	61
Letter 134: Augustine to Apringius (411)	63
Letter 139: Augustine to Marcellinus (411/412)	66
Letter 152: Macedonius to Augustine (413/414)	70
Letter 153: Augustine to Macedonius (413/414)	71
Letter 154: Macedonius to Augustine (413/414)	88
Letter 155: Augustine to Macedonius (413/414)	89

JUDICIAL AUTHORITY

Commentary on the gospel of John, 33 (419/421)	101
Sermon 302: On the feast of St Laurence	107
Sermon 13: On the words of Psalm 2.10	119

THE DONATIST CONTROVERSY

Letter 51: Augustine to Crispin (400)	128
Letter 66: Augustine to Crispin (401)	132
Letter 86: Augustine to Caecilian (406/409)	134
Letter 100: Augustine to Donatus (408)	134
Letter 87: Augustine to Emeritus (405/411)	136
Letter 88: Clergy of Hippo Regius to Januarius (406/408)	144
Letter 173: Augustine to Donatus (411/414)	152
Letter 204: Augustine to Dulcitius (419)	158
Letter 105: Augustine to the Donatists (409/410)	162
Letter 185: Augustine to Boniface (c. 417)	173

WAR AND PEACE

Sermon: The sacking of the city of Rome (410/411)	205
Letter 189: Augustine to Boniface (417)	214
Letter 220: Augustine to Boniface (428)	218
Letter 229: Augustine to Darius (429/430)	225

<i>Biographical notes</i>	227
<i>Notes to the text</i>	251
<i>Index of persons and places</i>	293
<i>Index of topics</i>	296

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,

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

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-

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

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

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

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.

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

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.

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.

Letter 104

409

Augustine greets in the Lord his distinguished and justly honoured and welcome brother Nectarius.

(1) I have read the letter from your kind self, a reply which arrived rather a long time after the letter I had delivered to you. I wrote back while Possidius my holy brother and fellow-bishop was still with me, and had not yet set sail.¹ However, I did not receive the letter you were good enough to give to him for me until 27 March, about eight months after I wrote.² I certainly do not know why my note took so long to reach you or yours to reach me; or perhaps your wise self only now wished to write back, and did not see fit to do so earlier.

If that is the case, I wonder what your reason was. Perhaps it was that you heard some news (which has not yet reached us) to the effect that my brother Possidius has had some success against your fellow-citizens. With all due respect to you, his love is better for them than yours is, in so far as his punishments are more severe.

Indeed, your letter shows that you are afraid of this, when you warn me to set before my eyes 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.’ Far be it from me to press for such things to be inflicted on any of our enemies, at our own hands or anyone else’s. However, as I said, if any rumour of such a thing reaches you, explain it more fully. Then we will know how to act to prevent it, or else how to reply to anyone who believes it.³

(2) I should prefer you to study my letter – the one to which you were reluctant to reply.⁴ I expressed my mind clearly enough there. I think, however, that you have forgotten what I wrote back to you, and you have ascribed to me utterly different views, ones quite unlike my own. In fact, you slipped into your letter something that I never said, as if you were remembering something that I had in fact put in my letter. You said that the final point in my letter was this: ‘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.’ Then, in order to show

what a great evil this is, you go on to add that, unless your view is mistaken, you judge it 'a more serious thing to be stripped of resources than to be killed'. Next, to clarify the type of resources you mean, you continue by saying that I know the claim made frequently in our literature that 'death entirely removes our perception of evil, while a life of poverty produces endless misfortune'. Then you conclude that it is a more serious matter 'to live a life full of evils, than to put an end to those evils by dying'.⁵

(3) I do not remember reading anywhere, either in our literature (to which, I admit, I applied my mind later than I should wish) or in yours (which I learned from my earliest youth) that 'a life of poverty produces endless misfortune'. Poverty with toil is surely no sin; and in fact it provides some restriction and check upon sin. There is no need to fear because of it that after this brief life the fact that someone lived as a pauper here will bring endless misfortune on his soul. In fact, no misfortune can be endless in the life we lead on earth, because that life cannot be endless. Indeed, it is not even very long, whatever age you reach, even old age.

On the other hand, I did read in your literature that the very life we enjoy is brief,⁶ although you judge that it can have endless misfortune, and now advise me that your literature frequently claims so. Some – but not all – of your literature does indeed state that death is the end of all evils. That is the view of the Epicureans, and of anyone else who holds that the soul is mortal. However, the philosophers whom Cicero calls the 'consular philosophers',⁷ because he considers their authority so weighty, believe that the soul is not destroyed when we complete the last day of our life, but departs. They also contend that it endures in a state of either blessedness or wretchedness, corresponding to its deserts, whether good or bad. This agrees with the view of holy scripture (and I try at least to grasp its basics).⁸

Death is, then, the end of evils, but for those only whose lives were chaste, devout, faithful and innocent; not for those who are inflamed by desire for the trifles and vanities of this temporary life, who although they think they are happy here are proved to be miserable by the fact that their wills are corrupt. After death they will be compelled not only to live in even more oppressive misery, but also to recognise it.

(4) Now that is said frequently both in some of your literature, which you hold in honour, and in all of ours, my excellent devotee of your hometown on earth.⁹ What you ought to fear for your fellow-citizens, then, is a

life of luxury rather than a life of poverty. If you do fear a life of poverty for them, you should warn them as a priority to avoid the sort of poverty that is ‘never reduced by plenty or by need’, even though it is surrounded by an abundance of earthly possessions – if I may borrow the words of one of your writers for those whose grasping greed is insatiable.¹⁰

However, in the letter of mine to which you were replying, I did not say that those of your citizens who are hostile to the church must be set straight through poverty so extreme as to lack the necessities of nature. It’s that sort of poverty that we in our mercy must assist; you thought it your duty to remind us of this, saying that ‘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’. Even then, one is better off in this sort of need than having a surfeit of possessions to use to indulge one’s wickedness. But God forbid that I would take the view that people with whom we are dealing should be restrained by being reduced to that degree of distress.

(5) Look at my letter again. Even though you didn’t think it worth rereading when you had to reply to it, at least you may have thought it worth putting somewhere so that it could be produced at your orders whenever you wished. Take note of what I said in it. You will find the words which you failed to answer – as I think you will admit – straight away. I shall now include some words from that letter of mine:

‘We have no desire’, I said, ‘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. 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.’¹¹

If you had studied these words of mine when you thought to reply, you would think it hostile rather than dutiful to beg me to avoid not just putting to death the people whose cause you are pleading, but even inflicting physical punishment on them. For I said that we wanted them to be safe in this respect, to live free from bodily harm. Nor should you be at all afraid of their living in poverty and having to be provided with food by other people because of us. For the second respect in which I said we

wanted them to be safe was to have the means of staying alive. As for the third, that they should have the means to live badly, let me take just one example: the resources for making the silver statues of their false gods. And what have they done to serve and adore these gods, and to keep worshipping them still? They have even pounced to set fire to the church of God, and they have stolen and given to their wretched mob resources intended for supporting the devoutest of the poor; furthermore, blood has been shed.

You are concerned for your city's interests! Why are you afraid of wielding a scalpel to their audacious behaviour? Otherwise it will be nourished and strengthened by your leniency which is so destructive. Explain this to me, give me a careful argument to show where the harm lies. Give thought and attention to what I am saying to you in case your purported petition seems to be cloaking an implied accusation against my words.¹²

(6) We hope that your citizens will be honourable, upright in their behaviour, and without excessive resources; we do not wish them to be forcibly reduced because of us to Cincinnatus' plough or Fabricius' hearth.¹³ But those leaders of the Roman republic were not cheapened in the eyes of the citizens by their poverty. Far from it: they were particularly loved for it, and were better fitted to administering the wealth of their homeland. Nor is it our hope or our aim to leave the wealthy in your home-town with only the ten pounds of silver ornaments that the famous Rufinus, who was twice consul, possessed. The censors, who were at that time still laudably strict, decreed that this should be cut back, as if it were a vice to have it.¹⁴

Now, however, the habits of a rather degenerate age persuade us to deal more mildly with feeble souls; Christian gentleness, then, sees as excessive what seemed just to those censors. You can tell, therefore, what a difference there is between, on the one hand, its being a punishable offence simply to possess such an amount, and, on the other hand, permitting someone to keep only that amount because of other very serious offences. What was then a sin we should wish now to be at least the punishment for a sin. But this is what can and ought to be done so as to avoid both the former level of severity, and the guaranteed freedom from punishment that celebrates riotously and offers itself as an example for imitation, to lure other wretches into punishments that are heavy, but deeply hidden.¹⁵

Grant me this much, at least, that those who are fighting to destroy our

basic necessities through arson might fear for their own superfluous possessions. Allow us also to give our enemies this benefit: while they are frightened of losing things which it will do them no harm to lose, they might avoid trying to commit deeds that will harm them. This should not be described as retribution for sin, but rather as safeguarding sensible policy. I am not calling for a penalty, but protecting them from incurring a penalty.

(7) If someone inflicts a degree of pain in order to prevent some fool from paying an awful penalty because he has got used to committing needless crimes, he is pulling a child's hair, as it were, to stop him from clapping at a serpent. Such love, by hurting him, ensures that his limbs are not damaged; but the thing we are deterring him from would put his life and his security at risk. It is no kindness for us to do anything that is requested of us; it is a kindness to do whatever does not harm the petitioners. On the whole, in fact, we would tend to help most by not giving what they want, and to do harm by giving it. Hence the saying, 'Don't give a boy a sword.' As Cicero says, 'You wouldn't give one even to your only son.'¹⁶ Indeed, the more we love someone, the less we ought to present him with the possibility of sinning at grave risk to himself. Cicero was talking about wealth when he said this, if I am not mistaken. In general, then, if it is dangerous to entrust something to people who will misuse it, it is also safer for them if you take it away from them. When doctors see some gangrene that needs cutting and cauterisation, they often show mercy by shutting their ears to the patient's copious flood of tears. If, as little boys, or even as bigger ones, we had been let off by our parents or teachers whenever we pleaded for pardon after committing some sin, would any of us have been bearable as an adult? Who would have learnt anything useful? These things are done out of care, not cruelty.

Please, in this affair do not pay attention only to ways of winning from us whatever your townsmen beg of you. Consider the whole matter carefully. If you ignore the past, which cannot now be undone, look ahead a little to the future. Have the sense to concentrate on the real interests of your petitioners rather than their desires. Surely we cannot be held to love them faithfully if our only concern is to stop their love for us being weakened because we fail to achieve their demands. In that case where would the man be who is praised in your literature as 'ruler of his homeland', who pays attention to his people's interests rather than their wishes?¹⁷

(8) Next you argue that ‘it makes no difference what kind of a sin has led to an appeal for leniency’.¹⁸ You would be right about this if we were dealing with a case of punishing people rather than of reforming them. A Christian’s heart will, I pray, never be driven to punishing anyone by a thirst for revenge. It will, I pray, when pardoning someone’s sin, neither fail to anticipate the prayers of the petitioner, nor always respond to them directly. No, it should always be done without hating the person, without *returning to him evil for evil* [1 Thess 5.15; Rom 12.17], without a burning desire to harm him, without being eager to gratify vengeance, even if it is due by law. On the other hand, it should be done without failing to consult his interests, to look ahead, and to restrain him from evil. For it would be possible for someone to show extreme hostility to a person he strongly dislikes, by neglecting to set him on the right path. Alternatively, he might impose some painful restraint upon someone he loves greatly and thus make him a better person.

(9) Now it is true, as you write, that repentance wins mercy and atones for the offence itself.¹⁹ But it is only that sort that is undertaken by true religion, with the future judgement of God in mind; not the sort that is displayed (or feigned) before human beings, just for the occasion, to free their ephemeral lives from immediate fear of trouble for the moment, rather than to cleanse the soul of its misdeeds for eternity. That is why we do believe that the pain of repentance will bear fruit for those Christians who have confessed their guilt and have begged for mercy, who were implicated in the offence either because they failed to provide assistance when the church was burning or because they stole something during the outrageous looting that took place.

We have taken the view that repentance suffices to reform them, because they have faith in their hearts, which will enable them to reflect on what they have to fear from the judgement of God.²⁰ But how can repentance heal those who not only fail to recognise the very source of forgiveness, but even continue to mock it and blaspheme against it? However, we do not harbour enmity against them in our hearts, because they are open and naked to the eye of God, and it is his judgement we fear, his assistance we are hoping for, both in this present life and in the life to come. In our judgement, though, we are showing our concern for them, if people who do not fear God have something to fear, which will not in fact harm their true interests, but might discipline their foolishness. Then it will prevent them from offending even more seriously the God they reject, because their damaging sense of security encourages them to

behave with even more arrogance. It will also stop them offering that security as an example for others to imitate, something more destructive still.

Finally, while you plead with us on their behalf, we are pleading with God for them, that he might turn them towards him, and he might purify their hearts by faith and teach them to embrace true repentance, which will keep them safe.

(10) Notice how much more appropriate and more beneficial is *our* love for these people than *yours* (I say this with all due respect to you), although in your judgement we are angry with them. We are begging for them to avoid far more serious harm, and to win greater goods. If you too loved them out of God's heavenly gift²¹ rather than from earthly human custom, and if you replied to me with sincerity that you were happy to listen to me pressing you towards the worship and religion of the most high God – then you would not just want this for them, but you would even beat them to it. That would mean that all our dealings about your petition could come to a very joyful and healthy conclusion. That would also enable you to reach the heavenly homeland. When I was encouraging you to attend it, you said that you were happy to embrace it. Now you could reach it through a true and devoted love for the home-town that gave you physical birth, by showing true concern for your citizens, bringing them not to empty and temporary enjoyment, nor to immunity from punishment for the outrage (which would be highly destructive) but to the grace of everlasting happiness.

(11) I have given you an exposition of my considered opinion on this issue, and of my deepest wishes. I admit that I do not know what is hidden in the plan of God: I am only human. However, I am absolutely certain that whatever it is, it is just and wise by comparison with any human mind, and very firmly established in incomparable excellence. The words that you can read in our scriptures are true: *There are many thoughts in the heart of a man, but the counsel of the Lord endures for ever* [Prov 19.21].

What time will bring, what will happen to help or hinder us, and, in short, how our wills might turn out as our immediate circumstances bring reform or sudden hope; whether God is so angry at these events that they will be punished more severely by being granted the immunity they are requesting, or whether he will in his mercy judge that they should be restrained in the way that we should like; or whether he will first employ some sharper, though more salutary, method of reforming them, and then when they undergo a true conversion, in accordance not with human

mercy, but with his own, will avert the terror he was preparing, and transform it into joy – all this he already knows, but we do not know.

But until this happens, why should your excellent self and I struggle in vain with one another? Let us lay this concern aside for a while, as its hour is not yet come, and deal, if you will, with a matter that is always pressing. There is no moment when it is not fitting and proper to discuss how we may please God. In this life it is either impossible, or at least extremely difficult, to fulfil this so perfectly that no sin at all remains in a person. That is why we must abandon all hesitation and take refuge in his grace. We can truly address him in the words of the man who professed to have heard them from the Cumaean seer as a sort of prophetic ode, and delivered them in a flattering verse to some nobleman:

With you as my guide, if any traces of our crimes remain,
They will be rendered harmless and free the earth from perpetual fear.²²

With him as our guide, indeed, all our sins are absolved and forgiven; and this path leads to our heavenly homeland. You were quite delighted to think of living there, when I recommended to you, as strongly as I could, that you should love it.

(12) The fact that you said that ‘all laws aim, by various paths and ways, at the heavenly homeland’ makes me nervous that you might be rather slow to grasp the only path that leads to it, if you think that the one on which you are established at present is going in that direction. Again, however, when I examine carefully the words you wrote, I think I am able to clarify your opinion reasonably sensibly. You did not say that all laws by various paths and ways ‘achieve’ or ‘reveal’ or ‘find’ or ‘approach’ or ‘obtain’ or anything else of that sort, but that they ‘aim at’ it.

The well-aimed and well-judged word you chose did not mean ‘reach’, but ‘desire to reach’. In that way you did not rule out the true path, nor did you admit any other false ones. The path that leads there does indeed aim to do so; but not every path that aims to in fact leads there. Anyone who is led there is undoubtedly blessed. Again, we all wish to be blessed – that is, we aim at it; but not all of us who wish it are capable of it – that is, of reaching the place at which we are aiming. The person who is going to reach it is the one who keeps to the path that allows him not only to aim at it, but also to reach it. He leaves everyone else on the paths which aim at their target without in the end reaching it. For one would not be going astray either if one had no aim at all, or if the truth at which one were aiming were secured.

Perhaps, though, when you said ‘different paths’ you did not want us to understand these as incompatible, just as when we talk of ‘different counsels’, all of which however help to build a life of goodness, some concerning chastity, others patience, others mercy, and so on. In that case, not only do different paths and ways aim at this homeland, but they also find it. Thus in holy scripture we read both ‘ways’ and ‘way’; for example, ‘ways’ in the sentence: *I will teach the unjust your ways and the impious will be turned to you* [Ps 51(50).13], and ‘way’ as here: *Lead me in your way and I will walk in your truth* [Ps 86(85).11].

The former ‘ways’ and the latter ‘way’ are not different; they are all one. Elsewhere holy scripture again says of them: *All the ways of the Lord are mercy and truth* [Ps 25(24).10]. Reflecting carefully on these words could produce a rich discourse and some delightful insights. This may need to be done, but I must put it off until another occasion.

(13) For the present, however, I think that I have done enough with regard to the duty I have assumed of replying to your excellent self. After all, Christ said, ‘I am the Way’; and we ought to seek mercy and truth in him. Otherwise, if we look elsewhere, we will make the mistake of holding to a path that aims at, but does not reach; just as if we wish to hold on to the path that gives rise to the view you quoted, that ‘all sins are equal’, wouldn’t it send us, like exiles, far away from our homeland of truth and blessedness?

Could anything be more irrational or more crazy than holding that someone who laughs a little excessively should be judged to have sinned as much as someone who savagely sets his home-town ablaze? In the view of certain philosophers, this path is not merely different, and still leading to a homeland in heaven, but is clearly distorted, and leads to very harmful error. However, you thought you should invoke it not out of personal conviction, but on behalf of your citizens, in the hope that we might pardon the violent men who lit the fires that burnt down the church, in the same way that we would pardon them if they were directing some wanton abuse at us.

(14) Look how you argued your case: ‘If (as some philosophers agree) all sins are equal, then pardon ought to be granted in common to all.’ Then when you were apparently labouring to show that all sins are equal, you continued with the words: ‘If someone has spoken a little rudely, he has sinned. If he heaps abuse or accusations on you, he has sinned equally.’²³ This is not explaining, but simply stating a distorted view without arguing any proofs for it. When you say, ‘he has sinned equally’,

one can reply at once, 'he hasn't sinned equally'. Perhaps you will demand proof of this from me. Well, have you proved that he did 'sin equally'?

Perhaps we ought to listen to your next sentence: 'If one person has stolen another's property, this should also be counted a misdeed.' Here even you are embarrassed; you are ashamed to say that he has sinned in the same way; instead you say 'should be counted a misdeed'. But the question is not whether it should be counted a misdeed, but whether this misdeed is linked by equality to that one. If both are equal because they are both misdeeds, then mice and elephants are equal because they are both animals, and flies and eagles, because they both fly!

(15) Now you move on and draw this conclusion: 'If he has violated secular places or sacred, still he should not be cut off from pardon.' Here, surely, you have come to the atrocity your own citizens committed, when you mention violating sacred places. However, not even you make the insolent claim that their sin is equal. All you do is beg pardon for them; and it is quite proper to seek that from Christians because their pity is plentiful, and does not correspond to the size of the sin. Earlier, I quoted the words from our scriptures: *All the ways of the Lord are mercy and truth* [Ps 25(24).10]. They should therefore pursue mercy, unless they hate the truth. It is owed according to Christian justice not only to those who have sinned 'equally' (if, say, they have spoken a little insolently) but also to those who have repented of an appalling and impious outrage.

But you are a man worthy of praise; please do not teach your son Paradoxus to follow those Stoic paradoxes; we pray that he will grow up for you truly devout and happy. Could a well-born young man learn any 'wisdom' more wicked and more dangerous to you yourself than that of equating abuse directed at some stranger with, well, not parricide, but merely abuse directed at his father?

(16) It will suit you better when you intervene with us on behalf of your citizens to remind us of Christian mercy rather than Stoic hardness. That not only fails to favour the cause you have adopted, it even greatly hinders it. For if we do not possess that mercy, we will not be liable to being swayed by any petition of yours or by any of their pleas. The Stoics count mercy a vice, and drive it out completely from their wise man's mind; they want him to be as utterly unyielding as iron.²⁴

The words you might quote from your Cicero may serve you better, therefore: he praised Caesar by saying, 'None of your virtues are more admirable or more welcome than your mercy.'²⁵ How much stronger