

DESCRIPTION FOR THE GENERAL PUBLIC

The Donatist schism was one of the main splits in the early Church. It took place in the Roman North Africa (mainly nowadays Tunisia and Algeria), it began about 311 and it lasted for more than a hundred years. During all this time there existed two separate, mutually hostile Churches in Africa.

The Donatists were called in this way from the name of one of their first leaders, Donatus. They did not accept the election of Caecilianus as the bishop of Carthage, because they accused his consecrators of betrayal of Christianity during the recently ended Diocletianic persecutions. The Donatists considered the sacraments administered by unworthy ministers as invalid. Therefore, the consecration of Caecilianus was invalid, and so was the baptism administered by him and by the priests in communion with him. As the result, the Donatists were baptizing again the Catholics who wanted to join their community.

The Donatism was alternatively persecuted and tolerated by the state authorities. For some time it was most probably the religion of the majority of African Christians. Its demise was caused by several causes, among them the appearance of so able prelates as Augustine of Hippo on the Catholic side, but chiefly by the decisive intervention of the imperial authority after 411. Donatism survived in some forms to the end of the sixth century.

The Donatists have been sometimes presented as a kind of the national and social opposition against the oppression of the Roman state, with which the Catholic Church colluded. Such vision of Donatism was dominant in the middle of the twentieth century. Although the shortcomings of such vision have been repeatedly shown since, no new full monograph was written, which would present the Donatist Church in its own right, as a religious movement with its own theology. I want to fill this gap.