

Canons of the Council of Carthage to Investigate Pelagianism

May 1, 418

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Synopsis:

After Coelestius appeared before Pope Zosimus for examination and was vindicated and after reading the letter and confession of faith that Pelagius had sent him Zosimus sent letters to the North African bishops declaring Coelestius and Pelagius to be orthodox, criticizing the African bishops conduct, and representing Heros and Lazarus (the two deposed bishops who had brought charges up against Pelagius for his Diospolis (Lydda) trial) as being wicked men, whom he had punished with excommunication and deposition. In response to these letters the African bishops assembled sometime around the end of 417 or beginning of 418 and in a Synodal letter to Zosimus declared "that he should hold to the sentence pronounced by Pope Innocent against Pelagius and Coelestius until both of them distinctly acknowledged that for every single good action we need the help of the grace of God through Jesus Christ; and this not only to perceive what is right, but also to practise it, so that without it we can neither possess, think, speak, or do anything really good and holy." Zosimus responded by affirming that he had already given the affair of the Pelagians his mature consideration, but added that he had transmitted all the documents to the Africans for the purpose of common consultation. This letter reached the hands of the Africans towards the end of April 418, and on the 1st of May they opened a new great or General Synod in the Secretarium of the Basilica of Faustus at Carthage. Bishops were present not only from all the provinces of Africa, but even from Spain, in all no less than two hundred. They composed eight or nine canons against Pelagianism, and eleven others, partly directed against the Donatists and partly concerning general matters.

Canon 1 "If any man says that Adam, the first man, was created mortal, so that whether he sinned or not he would have died, not as the wages of sin, but through the necessity of nature, let him be anathema."

Canon 2 "If any man says that new-born children need not be baptized, or that they should indeed be baptized for the remission of sins, but that they have in them no original sin inherited from Adam which must be washed away in the bath of regeneration, so that in their ease the formula of baptism 'for the remission of sins' must not be taken literally, but figuratively, let him be anathema; because, according to Romans 5:12, the sin of Adam (in quo omnes peccaverunt) has passed upon all."

Canon 3.1 "If any man says that in the kingdom of heaven or elsewhere there is a certain middle place, where children who die unbaptized live in bliss (beate vivant), whereas without baptism they cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven, that is, into eternal life, let him be anathema." [The authenticity of this canon has been brought into question, though there is some reason to believe that it was part of the original canon listing. In some manuscripts Canon 3.2, listed below, is listed here.]

Canon 3.2 "If any man says that the grace of God, by which man is justified through Jesus Christ, is only effectual for the forgiveness of sins already committed, but is of no avail for avoiding sin in the future, let him be anathema."

Canon 4 “If any man says that this grace only helps not to sin, in so far that by it we obtain a better insight into the Divine commands, and learn what we should desire and avoid, but does not also give the power gladly to do and to fulfill what we have seen to be good, let him be anathema.”

Canon 5 “If any man says that the grace of justification was given us in order that we might the more easily fulfill that which we are bound to do by the power of free will, so that we could, even without grace, only not so easily, fulfill the Divine commands, let him be anathema.”

Canon 6 “If any man understands the words of the Apostle: ‘If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us,’ to mean that we must acknowledge ourselves to be sinners only out of humility, not because we are really such, let him be anathema.”

Canon 7 “If any man says that the saints pronounce the words of the Lord’s Prayer, ‘forgive us our trespasses,’ not for themselves, because for them this petition is unnecessary, but for others, and that therefore it is, ‘forgive us,’ not ‘me,’ let him be anathema.”

Canon 8 “If any man says that the saints only pronounce these words, ‘forgive us our trespasses,’ out of humility, not in their literal meaning, let him be anathema.”

Canon 9 “It has already been ordered by a former plenary Council, that those communities which became Catholic before the Imperial laws against the Donatists were issued by Honorius, are to remain in the dioceses of those bishops through whom they became Catholic; but that if they entered into communion with the Church after the publication of those laws, they shall be made over to that diocese to which they, while they were still Donatists, belonged (de jure). But as many disputes have arisen and do arise among the bishops from this cause, it is now decided that if in any place a Donatist and a Catholic community have existed side by side, and belonged to different dioceses, both shall be made over to the diocese to which the Catholic section belonged, whether the conversion of the Donatists took place before or after the publication of those Imperial decrees.”

Canon 10 “If the Donatist bishop has himself become Catholic, the two bishops (he and the Catholic one) shall divide equally between them the two communities now united, so that one portion of the towns shall belong to one, and the other to the other bishop. The bishop who has been longest in office shall make the division, but the other shall have the choice. If there is only one township of this description, then it shall belong to whichever See is nearest to it; but if there are two equally near, the people shall decide it by the majority of votes. If the votes are equal, the elder bishop has the preference. If, however, the towns to which both parties belonged are of unequal number, so that they cannot be equally divided, the remaining one shall be dealt with as was prescribed above, in the preceding canon, with regard to a single town.”

Canon 11 “If, after the publication of this edict, a bishop has brought back a place to Catholic unity, and has held undisputed jurisdiction over it for three years, it may not be taken away from him. But if a Donatist bishop is converted, no disadvantage shall accrue to him from this arrangement, but for three years after his conversion he has the right of demanding back those places which belonged to his See.”

Canon 12 “If a bishop seeks to get into his power a diocese to which he thinks he has a claim, not through an episcopal decision, but by other means, and is opposed by another, he thereby forfeits his claim.”

Canon 13 “If a bishop takes no pains to win over to Catholic unity those places which belong to his

jurisdiction, he shall be exhorted to do so by the neighboring bishops. If he does not do so within six months from this warning, they shall belong to the bishop who wins them to the Church...In disputed cases, arbiters shall be chosen by the primate or by the parties themselves.”

Canon 14 “There can be no further appeal from judges who have been unanimously elected.”

Canon 15 “If the bishop of a mother-diocese shows no zeal against the heretics, he shall be warned by the neighboring bishops; and if in six months from that time he does not bring back the heretics, although those deputed to carry out the Imperial decree of union have been in his province, he shall be deprived of communion until he does so.”

Canon 16 “If, however, he falsely asserts that he has brought back the heretics into communion, when this is not true, he forfeits his See.”

Canon 17 “If priests, deacons, and inferior clerics complain of a sentence of their own bishop, they shall, with the consent of their bishop, have recourse to the neighboring bishops, who shall settle the dispute. If they desire to make a further appeal, it must only be to their primates or to African Councils. But whoever appeals to a court on the other side of the sea (Rome), may not again be received into communion by any one in Africa.”

Canon 18 “If a virgin is in danger of losing her virginity, because a great man demands her in marriage, or someone desires to violate her, or because she fears to die before receiving the veil, and the bishop, at the desire of her parents, gives her the veil before she has reached the age of twenty-five, the synodal decision with regard to this age shall not hinder him.”

Canon 19 “In order that all the bishops present at the Council should not be detained too long, it was decided that the General Council should make choice of three persons invested with full powers from each province. From the province of Carthage were chosen Vincent, Fortunatian, and Clarus; from Numidia, Alypius, Augustine, and Restitutus; from the Byzacene province, besides the saintly old man, the Primate Donatian, the Bishops Cresconius, Jocundus, and Aemilianus; from Mauretania Sitifensis, Severian, Asiaticus, and Donatus; from the province of Tripoli, as usual only one, Plautius. These, with the senex, namely, the Primate Aurelius, shall decide everything. The Synod also prayed that Aurelius would sign all the documents to be published.”