

Augustine of Hippo

Letter 93 to Vincentius

Focus on chapter 2, paragraphs 6 and 8; and chapter 6, paragraph 20

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Chapter 2

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6. Did not Sarah, when she had the power, choose rather to afflict the insolent bondwoman? And truly she did not cruelly hate her whom she had formerly by an act of her own kindness made a mother; but she put a wholesome restraint upon her pride. Genesis 16:5 Moreover, as you well know, these two women, Sarah and Hagar, and their two sons Isaac and Ishmael, are figures representing spiritual and carnal persons. And although we read that the bondwoman and her son suffered great hardships from Sarah, nevertheless the Apostle Paul says that Isaac suffered persecution from Ishmael: But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now; Galatians 4:29 whence those who have understanding may perceive that it is rather the Catholic Church which suffers persecution through the pride and impiety of those carnal men whom it endeavours to correct by afflictions and terrors of a temporal kind. Whatever therefore the true and rightful Mother does, even when something severe and bitter is felt by her children at her hands, she is not rendering evil for evil, but is applying the benefit of discipline to counteract the evil of sin, not with the hatred which seeks to harm, but with the love which seeks to heal. When good and bad do the same actions and suffer the same afflictions, they are to be distinguished not by what they do or suffer, but by the causes of each: *e.g.* Pharaoh oppressed the people of God by hard bondage; Moses afflicted the same people by severe correction when they were guilty of impiety: their actions were alike; but they were not alike in the motive of regard to the people's welfare — the one being inflated by the lust of power, the other inflamed by love. Jezebel slew prophets, Elijah slew false prophets; 1 Kings 18:4, 40 I suppose that the desert of the actors and of the sufferers respectively in the two cases was wholly diverse.

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8. If to suffer persecution were in all cases a praiseworthy thing, it would have sufficed for the Lord to say, Blessed are they which are persecuted, without adding for righteousness' sake. Matthew 5:10 Moreover, if to inflict persecution were in all cases blameworthy, it would not have been written in the sacred books, Whoever privily slanders his neighbour, him will I persecute [cut off, E.V.]. In some cases, therefore, both he that suffers persecution is in the wrong, and he that inflicts it is in the right. But the truth is, that always both the bad have persecuted the good, and the good have persecuted the bad: the former doing harm by their unrighteousness, the latter seeking to do good by the administration of discipline; the former with cruelty, the latter with moderation; the former impelled by lust, the latter under the constraint of love. For he whose aim is to kill is not careful how he wounds, but he whose aim is

to cure is cautious with his lancet; for the one seeks to destroy what is sound, the other that which is decaying. The wicked put prophets to death; prophets also put the wicked to death. The Jews scourged Christ; Christ also scourged the Jews. The apostles were given up by men to the civil powers; the apostles themselves gave men up to the power of Satan. In all these cases, what is important to attend to but this: who were on the side of truth, and who on the side of iniquity; who acted from a desire to injure, and who from a desire to correct what was amiss?

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Chapter 8

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20. Save yourself therefore, my brother, while you have this present life, from the wrath which is to come on the obstinate and the proud. The formidable power of the authorities of this world, when it assails the truth, gives glorious opportunity of probation to the strong, but puts dangerous temptation before the weak who are righteous; but when it assists the proclamation of the truth, it is the means of profitable admonition to the wise, and of unprofitable vexation to the foolish among those who have gone astray. For there is no power but of God: whosoever therefore resists the power, resists the ordinance of God; for rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Will you then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and you shall have praise of the same. Romans 13:1-3 For if the power be on the side of the truth, and correct any one who was in error, he that is put right by the correction has praise from the power. If, on the other hand, the power be unfriendly to the truth, and cruelly persecute any one, he who is crowned victor in this contest receives praise from the power which he resists. But you do not that which is good, so as to avoid being afraid of the power; unless perchance this is good, to sit and speak against not one brother, but against all your brethren that are found among all nations, to whom the prophets, and Christ, and the apostles bear witness in the words of Scripture, In your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; and again, From the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same, a pure offering shall be offered unto My name; for My name shall be great among the heathen, says the Lord. Malachi 1:11 Mark this: says the Lord; not says Donatus, or Rogatus, or Vincentius, or Ambrose, or Augustine, but says the Lord; and again, All tribes of the earth shall be blessed in Him, and all nations shall call Him blessed. Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel, who only does wondrous things; and blessed be His glorious name for ever, and the whole earth shall be filled with His glory: so let it be, so let it be. And you sit at Cartennæ, and with a remnant of half a score of Rogatists you say, Let it not be! Let it not be!

(Full text available at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102093.htm>)