

The question put to the saint, and on which he most reluctantly modified his opinion, was the following:

In the case of heretics and schismatics who, like the Donatists, made such enormous crimes as murder and suicide a part of their creed—is it allowable to grant them, not the full absolute pardon advocated by S. Augustin, but a *conditional* pardon only, viz., by giving them the choice between (a) "a disciplinary repression" of their criminal excesses, or (b) a public return to the Church, in token of sincere repentance. S. Augustin gave his assent to the above "alternative" because, *not* of the heresy, but of the crimes of the culprits, which really deserved death. The conditional pardon he subscribed to was, therefore, a most merciful and generous measure after all, though less so than the unconditional pardon at first advocated by our glorious saint.

[378] S. Augustin, after a long resistance, yielded at last, but under protest, as it were, and with the utmost reluctance, to the imperative necessity of saving the life and property of his fellow-Catholics by legally coercing—but always as gently as possible—the cruel Donatists, who were to be punished not as heretics, but solely as public criminals preaching and practising self-murder as well as the plunder, torturing, mutilation and massacre of Catholics. For a description of these enormities, see the life of the saint by his own disciple Possidius, a bishop in Africa. "It is not argument," writes the saint, "but experience which has modified my opinion" (Letter 93)—*i.e.*, not the mere schism of the Donatists, but their persecuting spirit and their criminal deeds of violence have compelled me to appeal to the repressive arm of the law.

In one of his letters, the saint tells us that, among other incredible barbarities, the Donatists poured vinegar mingled with lime into the eyes of their victims! (Letter 3, n. 1). Nevertheless, the Christ-like heart of S. Augustin yearningly sought those monsters and, precisely *because of their heresy*, pleaded for the most lenient forms of repression in their favor. (2 *Retract.*, c. 5; Ep. 48 ad Vincent., and Ep. 30 ad Bonif.)

[379] In fact, in the matter of humanitarian reforms, S. Augustin was fifteen centuries ahead of his time. Hear him protest, for instance, against the barbarous custom of "the question by torture."

"What shall I say," he exclaims, "of the torture which they make an accused person submit to? What should most appeal to our tears is that the judge who orders the torture for fear of killing an innocent man through ignorance, kills this same man by the very means he employs to save him from death He does not think it a crime to torture the innocent for the crime of others, or to force them by the violence of torture to declare themselves falsely guilty and to perish as such; or, even if they escape condemnation, to be the cause of their dying from the consequences" (Letter 113).