Andrew Chronister, *Augustine in the Pelagian Controversy: Defending Church Unity*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2024. Pp. 370. $39.95.

Andrew Chronister's first book is a revision and reorganization of his dissertation. His thesis argues that "Augustine's involvement in the Pelagian controversy was not simply a function of his opposition to certain views on grace, human sinlessness, the moral status of infants, or any of the other doctrinal topics touched on in his numerous anti-Pelagian works. Rather, I contend that Augustine's battle against the Pelagians was motivated to a significant degree by his fears that the Pelagians' arguments and actions over the course of the conflict might lead to significant divisions within the Church" (8–9). This desire for unity, Chronister claims, offers a "contextual factor" that "has often gone unnoticed or underestimated" among scholars in their attempts to understand why the Pelagians brought so much anxiety to Augustine in the last two decades of his life (4–5).

Chronister offers a narrow two-fold definition of unity that the Pelagians were threatening. First, it is "the unity of the Church of his day with the Church of the apostles." This unity is fostered by "believing and teaching what scripture and previous generations of Christians believed and taught" (22). Second, unity is understood as "unity within the Church of Augustine's day" (22). Christians, in other words, must maintain a unity with the beliefs of Christians of the past in order to maintain Christian unity in the present.

Chapter one explores the "pre-history" of the dispute. It describes the hazy history of the Pelagians in Rome before Alaric burned it to the ground in 410. Chronister here summarizes the biographies of Pelagius and Caelestius, the initial hints of controversy already beginning to stir over Pelagius' assertion of the possibility of living a sinless life and his suspicion that Adam's sin resulted in any effects for his progeny, how Pelagius was able to attract followers, the aristocratic circles in which the Pelagians ingratiated themselves, and the Pelagians' interest in the theological tradition of the East—with which they insisted they were in harmony.

It also discusses the North African context in which the Pelagians found themselves after the devastation of the Eternal City. At that very moment, the Donatist controversy reached a critical inflection point when the Emperor Honorius demanded that a conference, led by the tribune Flavius Marcellinus, meet in 411 to resolve that ecclesiastical feud. This feud had wrought disunity in North Africa for over one hundred years.

Chapter two focuses on the year 411, the first domino of the controversy that cascaded until its conclusion in 431. The controversy began when Caelestius peti-

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tioned to be ordained a deacon in Carthage. Rather than being ordained, Paulinus of Milan accused Caelestius of doctrinal deviation. The trial (*iudicium*), as Augustine (who was not present) later put it, handed down to Caelestius a "sentence worthy of his perversity" (80), which meant, at the very least, that he was not ordained. The author continues to describe Augustine's initial contributions to the fight, including his three books of the *De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo paruulorum (pecc. mer.)*, and three sermons (293, 294, 299) on similar anti-Pelagian themes that he preached in Carthage.

The third chapter ambitiously covers the period from 412 to 415. It begins by discussing Augustine's *De spiritu et littera*, his response to Marcellinus' objections after Marcellinus read *pecc. mer*. It continues with discussions of Augustine's letter of spiritual advice to the virgin Demetrias from the wealthy *gens Anicia* (to whom both Pelagius and Jerome also would write letters), his treatise *De natura et gratia* after having received a copy of Pelagius' *De natura* from Timasius and James, his interactions with the Spanish priest Orosius, his *De perfectione iustitiae hominis* after having received a copy of *Definitiones, ut dicitur, Caelestii* from the bishops Eutropius and Paul, and concludes with a description of the conflicts in Palestine that culminated in the Synod of Diospolis that declared Pelagius orthodox.

Chapter four focuses on the controversy between 416 and 418. After the African bishops learned of the decision of Diospolis, they were left scrambling to respect the authority of the council and, at the same time, continue their pursuit of the Pelagians. Initially, they successfully won Pope Innocent's support against the Pelagians, but when he died his successor, Pope Zosimus, initially had different ideas. Augustine continued his literary campaign with his *De gestis Pelagii* and his *De gratia Christi et de peccato originali*. Eventually, Pelagius and Caelestius were condemned in 418 by the Emperor Honorius, Pope Zosimus, and a council in Carthage.

The last chapter traces the fight until Augustine's death in 430. Julian of Eclanum and other Italian bishops refused to sign the *Tractoria* circulated by Pope Zosimus condemning Pelagius and Caelestius. Augustine hounded Julian with his *De nuptiis et concupiscentia*, *Contra duas epistulas Pelagianorum*, *Contra Iulianum*, and *Contra Iulianum opus imperfectum*, the book Augustine was writing when he died. Julian was exiled to the East, and, not long after Augustine died, the Pelagians were condemned by the Council of Ephesus.

Chronister's book is well written. The author remained focused on his objective without falling to the temptation of chasing after unnecessary tangents. The narrative is well organized and its thesis and supporting claims are clearly articulated. The book also offers a helpful appendix that explores three possible ways of

constructing the chronology of the controversy. It is the most detailed exploration of the chronology yet offered by any scholar.

While Chronister demonstrates that the Pelagians threatened the twin definition of unity described early in his book, he fails to show convincingly that the Pelagians ever posed a real risk of schism. Unity—then and now—is anchored only partly in the slippery bonds of belief and more in the formal chords of ecclesiastical communion. While disagreement always entails an implicit danger of division, it does not necessarily usher in an institutional break.

If ever there were a moment in the controversy when we would expect the disagreement to result in a formal break it would have been in 418 when Julian of Eclanum and the other Italian bishops refused to sign the *Tractoria* of Pope Zosimus that condemned Pelagius and Caelestius. They could have remained in Italy and established their own ecclesiastical institutions instead of heading East into exile in 419. But they did not. Chronister reminds us of the many efforts the Italians made in response to the situation in which they now found themselves. Bishops around Aquileia wanted a synod to resolve the issues at hand (263). Julian of Eclanum participated in a public debate in Rome over some of the Pelagian ideas (265). He wrote two letters to Pope Zosimus; in one of the letters, Julian refused to anathematize Pelagius and Caelestius but was willing to condemn some of the ideas attributed to them (265). The Italians appealed to Emperor Honorius to have his edict revoked or, at the very least, to minimize its implementation (265). Julian reached out to Count Valerius at the imperial court and requested that he assign judges to remedy the damage of Honorius' edict (266).

Chronister interprets all of these actions as threats to unity, but they are better understood as attempts at reconciliation from within the established ecclesiastical institution. If the Italians were threatening schism, why did they put so much energy into trying to reverse the condemnations of Pelagius and Caelestius? Why didn't they take the chaos of that summer as an opportunity to declare a formal break? Their efforts after 418 and afterwards are signs of the desire to retain unity, not to usher in disunity.

Unity is established on more than just sharing the same theological conclusions. As Fr. Daniel J. Harrington demonstrated in his book *The Church According to the New Testament* (Bloomsbury, 2001), unity from the beginning was predicated on five signs. Certainly, the first is the sign of the unity of belief (Gal. 1:6–12). But unity does not rest on shared doctrine alone. The reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles established through Christ brought unity to a divided humanity. Now, all are one in Christ (Eph. 2:12–19; 3:6; 4:3–6). The third sign of unity is financial

interdependence, which is not simply a sign of Christians being nice to each other but is a sign that individual communities across geography are one (Gal. 2:4–10). Acts describes how Jesus' earliest followers lived communally after the Ascension, the fourth sign of unity (2:3–44). In the second century, Ignatius of Antioch asserted that unity comes through and with communion with the local bishop, the fifth sign of unity. He claimed that every action in the community must be done with the consent of the bishop—including any actions by the presbyters and deacons.

Unity, we see in the end, is manifold. It includes the unity of belief, yes, but is not confined to it. Augustine and the Pelagians did disagree anthropologically and—in the eyes of two Popes, the Emperor, and the bishops of North Africa—that disagreement necessitated punitive measures until the Pelagians reformed. But, disagreement over ideas and formal ecclesiastical schism should not be confused or conflated. While the Pelagians strongly advocated for their own ideas against Augustine, they never evinced any desire to create their own parallel institutional structures in a similar way as the Donatists and Arians created in the fourth century.

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