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Aemulator Et Imitator: Possidius' Vita Augustini as a Fifth-Century Discipleship Tool

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I. Introduction

In the final chapter of his *Vita Augustini*, Possidius declares, “I want to emulate and imitate him in the present world and enjoy the promises of almighty God with him in the world to come.”¹ While stating this resolution at the end of his work, Possidius actually articulates his intent for writing the *Vita* in the first place— to invite others, particularly spiritual leaders, to reflect upon Augustine’s example and to imitate it.

In this paper, I will argue that the *Vita*, a work largely ignored by Augustinian scholars, served as a sequel of sorts to Augustine’s *Confessiones* in that it continued to inspire and exhort servants of God and church leaders toward making spiritual progress (*proficere*) while also providing practical help for how to minister in the fifth-century uncertainty of Roman Africa. To make the case, I will first show that while Possidius’ work generally resembles the corpus of the third- and fourth-century *vitae*, its unique features and purpose do distinguish it from the period’s hagiography. Finally, through Possidius’ lenses, I will argue that imitation (*imitatio*) was more than a mere literary device in hagiography but a continuation of Augustine’s convictions for discipleship, particularly for church leaders in the fifth century. In short, I trust this paper will

¹ *Et in hoc saeculo aemulator et imitator existam, et in futuro omnipotentis Dei promissis cum eodem perfruar.* Possidius, *Vita Augustini* 31.11. All Latin quotations of Possidius and Augustine are from *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina, S. Aurelii Augustini Opera Omnia* [website] <http://www.augustinus.it/latino>. English translations are from John E. Rotelle, *Life of Saint Augustine* (Villanova: Augustinian Press, 1988).

encourage students of Augustine to “take up and read” Possidius’ *Vita* and that modern ministers will consider afresh the role of imitation in mentoring and discipleship.

II. Who was Possidius?

Possidius (c. 370-440) claimed to have known Augustine on an intimate level for forty years.² He probably joined Augustine’s garden monastery at Hippo in 391 and then later moved with Augustine into the clergy house (*monasterium clericorum*) in 395 when he was consecrated as co-bishop in Hippo.³ Around 400, Possidius was set apart as the bishop of Calama (modern Guelma, Algeria) and served in that role until 437 when he was forced to flee as the Vandal Genseric conquered the city.⁴

According to the acts of the North Africa church councils, Possidius was an active participant in the councils of Carthage of 403, 404, 407, 410, 411 and 418 as well as the council of Milevus in 416.⁵ At times, his involvement included traveling after certain councils to communicate a decision or to carry out the will of the assembled bishops.⁶ Following the council of Milevus, Possidius co-signed Augustine’s *Epistulae* 176-177—addressed to Bishop Innocent of Rome— letters that communicated the theological position of the Numidian bishops regarding Pelagius.

Possidius’ episcopal service was repeatedly met with violence. After attempting to reach out in an evangelical and unifying manner to his Donatist counterpart in Calama

² Cf. Possidius, 31.11.

³ Cf. Edward Smither, “Principles of Mentoring Spiritual Leaders in the Pastoral Ministry of Augustine of Hippo,” (PhD diss., University of Wales-Lampeter, 2006), 204-220; cf. Possidius, 19.6; and Gustave Bardy, *Saint Augustin: L’homme et l’œuvre* (Paris: Bibliothèque Augustinienne, 1948), 209.

⁴ Cf. Augustine, *Epistula* 101; and Mark Vessey, “Possidius,” in Fitzgerald, Allan, *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 668.

⁵ Cf. André Mandouze, *Prosopographie chrétienne du Bas-empire, Vol. I, Afrique (303-533)* (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1982), 56-58.

⁶ Following the councils of 404 and 410, Possidius traveled to the imperial court at Ravenna. After the councils of 407 and 418, he traveled with Augustine in Africa on church business. Cf. Smither, 280-281; Mandouze, 57.

in 403, Possidius was physically beaten by a Donatist mob.⁷ Similarly, in 408, he was the victim of an attack at the hands of a pagan mob. Following this incident, Augustine personally traveled to be with his disciple and colleague, which most likely explains his noticeable absence at the councils of Carthage in 408 and 409.⁸ Finally, during the horrific Vandal siege of Calama in 428, Possidius and other clergy took refuge with Augustine in Hippo.⁹ Possidius did return to Calama after Augustine's death in 430 for a brief period of time; yet, as noted, he completely abandoned the city in 437.¹⁰

Thus, Possidius' claim to a close relationship with Augustine is quite credible. After several years of common living in the Hippo monasteries, Possidius maintained regular contact with Augustine through collaboration during and after annual church councils, including some extended periods of travel. Othmar Perler has further argued that the two bishops were in contact during Augustine's other travels.¹¹ Finally, as a result of his displacement from Calama in 428, Possidius was with Augustine during the final two years of Augustine's life and present when Augustine died.¹² Rotelle argues that since Possidius received only one letter from Augustine (*Epistula* 245), the two men must have been in such regular contact that correspondence was not warranted.¹³

⁷ This "outreach" was a directive of the council of Carthage of 403— an attempt to solve the Donatist schism. Cf. Vessey in Fitzgerald, 668; Smither, 271; and Mandouze, 890-891.

⁸ Cf. Augustine, *Epistula* 91; Smither, 285; and Othmar Perler, *Les Voyages de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1969), 266-269.

⁹ Cf. Possidius, 28.13; 29:1-2; Vessey in Fitzgerald, 668; and Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1967, 2000), 409.

¹⁰ Cf. Rotelle, 17.

¹¹ Cf. Perlman, 86, 232, 265-269, 346; and Smither, 283-285.

¹² Cf. Possidius, 29; 31.

¹³ Cf. Rotelle, 12. Letters were of course one of Augustine's primary means of communicating with and mentoring his Hippo monastery alumni who were serving the African church. 105 of Augustine's 252 extant letters were addressed to clergy and nearly all contained an element of mentoring. Cf. Smither, 220-254.

The *Vita Augustini* was Possidius' only literary contribution. As Possidius probably returned to Calama in late 431 or early 432 after the Vandal siege of Hippo, the *Vita* was most likely composed sometime between 432 and 437.

III. Hagiography as a Genre

In order to give a context in which to analyze Possidius' *Vita*, it would be beneficial first to survey briefly the corpus of *vitae* in circulation prior to the fifth century as well as to consider hagiography in general as a genre of religious literature. What was its nature and structure? Who were the authors and audiences? What were its purposes and intents in relation to the life of the church?

1. Hagiography in Modern Regard

The corpus of hagiography, generally defined as “lives of saints,” is vast and includes over 8000 individual biographies stemming from the early church through the medieval period.¹⁴ Despite its widespread audience and acceptance in antiquity, the majority of modern church historians have little regard for its historical value. Hence, hagiography has become a much castigated notion leading scholars to dismiss it as pious fiction or fraudulent plagiarism, and thus of little historical value.¹⁵

Edward Gibbon sharply criticized it for being untruthful yet rationalized its lack of historicity on account of the hagiographers' pious intentions.¹⁶ Hyppolète Delehaye, in his definitive work *Legends of the Saints*, dismissed the accounts of the saints as legends

¹⁴ Cf. *Bibliotheca Hagiographica Latina Antiqua et Mediae Aetatis* (2 vols.) (Brussels: Society of Bollandists, 1898-1901, 1949); and Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: OUP, 1992), 13.

¹⁵ Cf. Heffernan, 16, 55.

¹⁶ Cf. Gibbon, Edward, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, Vol. I* (New York: Modern Library, 1932), 467; and Heffernan, 55.

fabricated by plagiarizing writers who could not distinguish between history and myth.¹⁷ He further attacked readers of hagiography for being simple and primitive.¹⁸ In particular, Delehaye seems to have a certain disdain for any accounts of the miraculous.¹⁹ Thomas O’Loughlin pointed out that Delehaye’s de-mythologizing approach to hagiography was a forerunner to Bultmann’s critical approach to Scripture as Delehaye’s work precedes Bultmann by some twenty years.²⁰

In the last century, John J. O’Meara also dismissed hagiography as a credible historical source, assigning it lesser status on the intellectual chain of dignity, especially when compared to great works of early Christian thought. The great irony is that while O’Meara held these views and discouraged scholarly work in hagiography, he became a leading scholar in Irish Latin works and produced a translation of *The Voyage of St. Brendan!*²¹

The modern dismissal of hagiography by these and other scholars is actually more reflective of a post-19th century worldview than a patristic or medieval one. As Heffernan argues, a “. . . modern understanding of medieval sacred biography remains overly committed to this post-Enlightenment position. Such an empirical view . . . misunderstood and misrepresented the idea of history which sacred biography claimed for itself.”²² The modern empirical view not only dismisses out rightly the miraculous

¹⁷ Hyppolète Delehaye, trans. V.M. Crawford, *The Legends of the Saints: An Introduction to Hagiography. Internet Medieval Sourcebook* [website] <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/delehaye-legends.html> (accessed September 3, 2007), 12, 66.

¹⁸ Ibid. 22.

¹⁹ Ibid. 50.

²⁰ Cf. Thomas O’Loughlin’s introduction to Hyppolète Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), x.

²¹ Cf. John J. O’Meara, *The Voyage of St. Brendan* (Buckinghamshire, UK: Colin Smythe, 1991). I am indebted to my conversations and correspondence with Thomas O’Loughlin, a student of the late O’Meara, who shared with me these insights.

²² Cf. Heffernan, 39.

and supernatural, but it also suspiciously interprets the author's intentions and motives.²³ While its reductionist tendencies reveal a rationalist bias toward myth, the value of hagiography value is relegated to an existential level as Gibbon has concluded. That is, though historically inaccurate, it is religiously meaningful.²⁴

Ironically, patristic and medieval intellectuals like Athanasius, Augustine, Jerome, the Cappadocians, Aquinas, and Bonaventure all had a high regard for hagiography and most contributed to this genre. Unlike the post-Enlightenment historians, their spiritual worldview was not at all vexed by the miraculous nor did they question the sincerity of the hagiographer.²⁵

In appealing to modern scholars to read hagiography with less skepticism, Heffernan has rightly renamed this genre "sacred biography." While the position of this paper is certainly not an uncritical acceptance of hagiography— I maintain with Heffernan that there is much value in surveying these texts in order to gain some historical understanding, especially when the particular account can be corroborated from other sources. Yet, as we shall consider shortly, hagiography ought to be considered for its authorial intent vis à vis the original audience and for its value as a discipleship tool in the early church.

2. Nature of Hagiography

Before moving to the broader question of intent and purpose, the categories, nature and general patterns of hagiography must be treated. Delehaye categorizes hagiography

²³ Ibid. 49.

²⁴ Cf. Kevin Vanhoozer, *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 39; David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1989, 2000), 129-130, 182; and Heffernan, 41.

²⁵ Delehaye admitted as much (Delehaye, 65). Cf. Heffernan, 27, 61.

according to its level of historical reliability—²⁶ not terribly unlike the Islamic science of the *hadith* tradition. Yet, as a genre, patristic hagiography falls into three broad categories: accounts of martyrdom, lives of saints, and sermons or orations dedicated to saints or martyrs. A brief consideration of each category follows including a summary of some key examples.

(1) Martyrs

Beginning with Luke's account of Stephen in Acts 7,²⁷ arguably the earliest account of Christian martyrdom, the lives and testimonies of the martyrs quickly began to be written and circulated in the church in the early centuries.²⁸ This form of hagiography was, of course, accelerated by sporadic periods of persecution against the church prior to Galerius' edict of Nicomedia in 311. The stories of the martyrs developed within the context of the church's battle with the lapsed and the confessors, schismatic movements (Novatianism, Donatism), and the resulting questions of soteriology and church membership. They also surely contributed to the cult of martyrs and veneration of saints that plagued the church in the patristic period.²⁹

The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* is a famous account of the bishop of Smyrna's arrest and execution around 155.³⁰ Though generally discounted because of the voice heard

²⁶ Delehaye's levels include: (1) saints officially canonized by the church (2) eyewitness accounts (3) accounts based on written sources (4) accounts based on imagined sources and (5) forgeries. Cf. Delehaye, 108-115.

²⁷ Cf. Heffernan, 218.

²⁸ Herbert Mursurillo's *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972) provides a translation of some key accounts of martyrdom.

²⁹ For more on the accounts of martyrdom and cult of martyrs, see W.H.C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus*, (Oxford: Blackwell), 1965. For more on hagiographical accounts of martyrdom, see Heffernan, 218-221.

³⁰ Cf. Michael Holmes, *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* in Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992, 1999), 222-245.

from heaven³¹ and Polycarp's inflammability at the stake,³² it was nevertheless recorded by eyewitnesses shortly after the event.³³ While the author is clearly biased toward Polycarp's humility and holiness,³⁴ the work is addressed to the community of faith³⁵ to encourage them to follow Polycarp's imitation of Christ even to the point of martyrdom.³⁶ Thus, he was “. . . an outstanding martyr whose martyrdom all desire to imitate, since it was in accord with the pattern of the gospel of Christ.”³⁷

The *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*, equally as famous as Polycarp's account, is the story of an aristocratic North African woman, her servant Felicitas, and three other men who were executed in the arena in Carthage in 203. Allegedly edited by Tertullian, the text has three voices: Perpetua's own diary,³⁸ her fellow martyr Saturus,³⁹ and an anonymous author and narrator.⁴⁰ While Delehayé would certainly have problems with the four dream narratives in the text,⁴¹ the fact that Perpetua and Felicitas are canonized by the church does give more historical credence to the account.⁴² With sacrificing all for Christ as the primary theme, the hagiographer's intended purpose is

³¹ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 9.1.

³² *Ibid.* 15-16.

³³ *Ibid.* 15.1; 18.1. This criteria would put it high on Delehayé's scale of credibility (cf. Delehayé, 112-113).

³⁴ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 7.3.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 1.2.

³⁶ A similar case can be made in Ignatius' *Letter to the Romans*, 6.3 (cf. Holmes, 173).

³⁷ *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 19.1. English translation is from Holmes, 243. This value is also repeated in 22.1.

³⁸ James W. Halporn, *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis* (Bryn Mawr, PA: Bryn Mawr, 1984), 3-10.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 11-13.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 1-3; 14-21.

⁴¹ Cf. Heffernan, 200.

⁴² Cf. Delehayé, 108-109.

explicit— to be read for the “edification of men”⁴³ and for “the edification of the church.”⁴⁴

(2) Lives

A second area of hagiography is simply a testimony of the “lives” (*vitae*) of saints. The earliest and most well known accounts in the patristic period, which will be discussed briefly, are dedicated to monks (Antony, Paul, Malchus), monk-bishops (Martin of Tours), and bishops (Ambrose).

Athanasius’ *Vita Antonii*, a much celebrated work by the embattled bishop of Alexandria, was written to extol the virtues of heremitic monasticism. Though Athanasius, like other hagiographers, appealed to his own credibility as a reporter,⁴⁵ modern readers have been skeptical of a piece that includes such supernatural elements as elaborate battles and even conversation with the devil,⁴⁶ delivering others from evil spirits,⁴⁷ healing,⁴⁸ and visions.⁴⁹ Perhaps Athanasius’ greatest bias was depicting Antony as a thorough going Nicene Christian who left his monastic dwelling to make an appearance in Alexandria to express his anti-Arian position!⁵⁰ Despite these problems, Athanasius’ purpose is also clear— to show through Antony’s life that Jesus is Lord and that the Christian is victorious in the spiritual realms,⁵¹ and that his readers would emulate Antony’s devotion to monastic discipline.⁵²

⁴³ . . . *aedificationem hominis* . . . (*Passio* 1.1 in Halporn, 11).

⁴⁴ . . . *exempla in aedificationem Ecclesiae legere debet* . . . (*Passio*, 21.11 in Halporn, 22).

⁴⁵ Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*, Prologue.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 5-6; 16-43; 55-56.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 48; 63-64.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 14-15; 57-58; 61-62; 71; 83-85.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 60; 65.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 67-70; 82.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 94.

⁵² *Ibid.* Prologue.

It seems that Jerome's purpose in writing the *Vita Pauli* was to show that Paul and not Antony was the originator of the heremitic monastic life. He would later contribute the *Vita Malchi*, a monk's battle to preserve his virginity amidst the challenges of slavery, kidnapping, depression, and forced marriage.⁵³ Despite his prowess as a translator and exegete, Jerome's hagiographical work is the most difficult to believe amongst the *vitae* and has been deemed "monastic romance" by one scholar.⁵⁴

Sulpitius Severus' *Vita Sancti Martini* was a prized piece depicting the life of the soldier turned monk who later became bishop of Tours. Despite Severus' statement of his veracity,⁵⁵ Boniface Ramsey dismisses the work as filled with "fantastical improbabilities"⁵⁶ largely on account of Martin's confrontations with the devil,⁵⁷ exorcisms,⁵⁸ healings,⁵⁹ and bold confrontation of evil pagan rituals.⁶⁰ Though we would expect Delehaye to side with Ramsey in his assessment of Severus' account, he surprisingly refers to Severus as an historian.⁶¹ Perhaps Delehaye gives more credence to this text because much of Severus' account comes from his own personal contact with Martin.⁶² Aside from the miraculous accounts, Martin is also remembered for his stature as a monk-bishop⁶³ as well as an ally and disciple of Hilary of Poitiers in the battle

⁵³ Cf. Stefan Rebenich, *Jerome* (London:Routledge, 2002), 85.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Cf. Sulpitius Severus, *Vita Sancti Martini*, 1.

⁵⁶ Boniface Ramsey, *Ambrose* (London: Routledge, 1997), 195.

⁵⁷ Cf. Severus, 6; 21-24.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 17.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 7-8; 15; 18-19.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 11-14.

⁶¹ Cf. Delehaye, 61.

⁶² Cf. Severus, 25.

⁶³ *Ibid.* 9-10. Two helpful studies on the patristic monk-bishop phenomenon include: Andrea Sterk, *Renouncing the World Yet Leading the Church: The Monk-Bishop in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); and Philip Rouseau, "The Spiritual Authority of the 'Monk-Bishop': Elements in Some Western Hagiography of the Fourth and Fifth Centuries," *Journal of Theological Studies* 23 (1971), 380-419.

against Arianism.⁶⁴ Regardless of modern disagreements over the *Vita*'s credibility, Severus' intended purpose for writing is clear: ". . . I think I will accomplish something well worth the necessary pains, if I write the life of a most holy man, which shall serve in the future as an example to others; by which, the readers shall be roused to the pursuit of true knowledge, and heavenly warfare, and divine virtue."⁶⁵

Paulinus of Milan dedicates the *Vita Ambrosii* to Augustine, who had requested that Paulinus write a testimony of Ambrose's life in the pattern employed by Athanasius, Jerome, and Sulpitius Severus.⁶⁶ Thus, Paulinus' claim to truthfulness is also disregarded by modern commentators as an obligatory literary device,⁶⁷ and three particular events in the work are considered fabricated: the account of bees swarming in and out of the infant Ambrose's mouth;⁶⁸ his raising a dead child to life;⁶⁹ and his ascension from catechumen to bishop in eight days.⁷⁰ Further, Ambrose's initial refusal of the episcopal appointment is regarded as a trope— another hagiographical device intended to highlight his humility and holiness.⁷¹ Ironically, Ambrose's conflict with the devil and ministry as an exorcist are not addressed with the same scrutiny.⁷²

Despite these criticisms of Paulinus' motive and accuracy, his *Vita* contains elements that are historically reliable and can be corroborated by Ambrose's letters and

⁶⁴ Cf. Severus, 6.

⁶⁵ ". . . unde facturus mihi operae pretium videor, si vitam sanctissimi viri, exemplo aliis mox futuram, perscripsero: quo utique ad veram sapientiam et caelestem militiam divinamque virtutem legentes incitabuntur. Severus, 1, *The Latin Library* [web site] <http://www.thelatinlibrary.com/sulpiciusseverusmartin.html> (accessed September 28, 2007). English translation is from Sulpitius Severus, *On the Life of St. Martin*, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library* [website] <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf211.ii.ii.html> (accessed September 10, 2007).

⁶⁶ Paulinus, *Vita Ambrosii*, 1.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 2.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 3.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 28.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 9. Cf. Ramsey, 195.

⁷¹ Paulinus, 9.

⁷² *Ibid.* 21.

the acts of church councils in Italy. Though previously a local Roman governor, he did indeed change careers in 374 and became the bishop of Milan. It is also evident that he was a defender of the church of Milan against its enemies, which included civil authorities and Arian church leaders.

Regardless of the historical quibbles surrounding *Vita Ambrosii*, Paulinus' key theme is simply that Ambrose was a holy man and bishop for the people of Milan.⁷³ Thus, his purpose was to encourage Christians and church leaders alike to imitate Ambrose's example.

(3) Sermons and Orations

Sermons and orations also functioned in the same manner as the lives of the martyrs and saints and should also be considered in the corpus of early church hagiography. In *Oratione* 21, Gregory of Nazianzus commemorated the life of Athanasius while Gregory of Nyssa accomplished the same in a funeral eulogy to his brother Basil of Caesarea. Augustine dedicated around 100 sermons to the memory of the martyrs, preaching them on their feast days.⁷⁴ It was for this reason that he refused the request of Paulinus of Milan—the very man whom Augustine had commissioned to write the *Vita Ambrosii*—to write a general life of the martyrs.⁷⁵

To demonstrate how sermons also related to the overall genre of hagiography, a brief survey of Augustine's nine sermons commemorating Cyprian, the martyred bishop

⁷³ Ambrose is referred to as holy (*sanctus*) on seven occasions in Paulinus (Paulinus, 16.3; 18.4; 33.1; 40.1; 45.2; 51.1; 52.1). Cf. Emilien Lamirande, *Paulin de Milan et La Vita Ambrosii: Aspects de la religion sous le Bas Empire* (Paris: Desclée, 1983), 77.

⁷⁴ These sermons can be found in English in John E. Rotelle, *Sermons: Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, Vol. III, books 9-10* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1994). Rotelle's translation and commentary is hereafter WSA.

⁷⁵ Cf. Augustine, *Epistula* 29*.1; and Louis Hamilton, "Possidius' Augustine and Post-Augustinian Africa," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12.1 (2004), 92.

of Carthage, will be considered.⁷⁶ Augustine preached *Sermo* 309 in Carthage and his purpose was to celebrate Cyprian's victorious martyrdom.⁷⁷ Cyprian is depicted as a heavenly citizen engaged in battle in the earthly city with political leaders whom Augustine referred to as the devil's agents.⁷⁸ In this context of suffering, Augustine highlighted Cyprian's practical and tangible work as a bishop.⁷⁹

Sermo 310 was most likely preached in Hippo, which alone indicates that Cyprian's life and martyrdom were known by the greater North African church.⁸⁰ As Cyprian was renowned for his preaching, writings, and what others reported of his life, Augustine seems to build upon that reputation in this sermon and implicitly invites the hearer to imitate Cyprian.⁸¹ Finally, Augustine adds that God is victorious in martyrdom.⁸²

In *Sermo* 311, Augustine reminded his listeners that “. . . the right way to celebrate the festivals of the martyrs should be by imitating their virtues. It's easy enough to celebrate in honor of a martyr; the great thing is to imitate the martyr's faith and patience.”⁸³ As martyrs like Cyprian gave their lives and rejected the world's pleasures, Augustine urges his people to renounce the world and live for eternity.⁸⁴

⁷⁶ Augustine preached each sermon on September 14, Cyprian's feast day and the date of his martyrdom in 258. Though Augustine actually preached ten feast day sermons about Cyprian, *Sermo* 313F does not mention Cyprian and will not be examined in this study.

⁷⁷ Augustine, *Sermo* 309.1.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 309.2, 6.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 309.4.

⁸⁰ Augustine, *Sermo* 310.1.

⁸¹ Ibid. 310.4.

⁸² Ibid. 310.2.

⁸³ *Sed celebratio solemnitatis martyrum, imitatio debet esse virtutum. Facile est honorem martyris celebrari: magnum est fidem atque patientiam martyris imitari.* Augustine, *Sermo* 311.1 in PL 38 <http://www.augustinus.it/latino/discorsi/index2.htm>. All English translations of Augustine's *sermones* are from Rotelle, WSA.

⁸⁴ Augustine, *Sermo* 311.3.

In *Sermo* 312, Augustine tells of Cyprian's conversion experience and the fate of those who emulated his faith. He recounts, "Some people, you see, by imitating Cyprian gained life."⁸⁵ Through remembering Cyprian's life of faith in word and in deed, Augustine concludes by praising the God of Cyprian.⁸⁶

Augustine focuses on Cyprian as a model convert, pastor, confessor, and persevering saint in *Sermo* 313.⁸⁷ A model that brings glory to God, Cyprian is depicted as a sword in Lord's hands, slaying His enemies and making friends of them as they come to saving faith.⁸⁸

In *Sermo* 313A, Augustine again reminds his hearers— "it's easy to celebrate the feasts of the martyrs; it's difficult to imitate the martyrs' sufferings."⁸⁹ Acknowledging the average person's love for the shows in the coliseum and imaginative identification with the gladiator, Augustine challenges them to imitate Cyprian who was put on display for his holiness and commitment to truth.⁹⁰ Augustine also indicates in this sermon that Cyprian's *Passio* was read publicly in the church and thus well known to the African Christians.⁹¹

In *Sermo* 313B, Augustine speculates that even Cyprian's persecutors became imitators of his faith, were converted, and followed him in martyrdom.⁹² He adds in *Sermo* 313C that because of Cyprian's death, God is praised and believers are encouraged, and the pleasant aroma of Christ has spread in Carthage, Africa, and

⁸⁵ *Alii enim Cyprianum imitando vixerunt.* Augustine, *Sermo* 312.3.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 312.5.

⁸⁷ Augustine, *Sermo* 313.2.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 313.2, 5.

⁸⁹ *Facile est martyrum sollemnia celebrare; difficile est martyrum passiones imitari.* Augustine, *Sermo* 313A.1.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 313A.3.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Augustine, *Sermo* 313B.4.

throughout the world.⁹³ In *Sermo* 313D, Augustine highlights Cyprian's consistent life and teaching: "what he taught before he carried it out, what he carried out because he already taught it."⁹⁴ As Cyprian followed Christ in His sufferings, Augustine challenges his hearers to deny the temporal world and live for eternal purposes.⁹⁵ Finally, in *Sermo* 313E, Augustine refers to Cyprian's example as a lover of peace and unity as well as a responsible martyr to condemn the violence of the Donatist Circumcellions whom he regarded as false martyrs.

3. Summary

As we have shown to this point, there was a great deal of interest in the lives of the martyrs, saints, monks, and bishops and their memories were preserved through the genre of hagiography or through sermons. Church fathers like Augustine and Jerome not only contributed to this church literature but encouraged its reading as a means of teaching in the church. Not surprisingly, the authors of hagiography were typically clergy and the audience was generally understood to be the communion of saints.⁹⁶

In terms of its historical reliability, hagiography ought to be scrutinized, for as we have seen, there are indeed some fanciful accounts that are desperate for further verification from other sources. We must also admit that most hagiographers had a strong bias regarding their subject such as Athanasius presenting Antony as anti-Arian. Yet, a wholesale denial of all that is supernatural or that pertains to the devil seems to reflect a post-Enlightenment, empirical worldview that has characterized the criticisms of Gibbon, Delehay, and O'Meara among others.

⁹³ Augustine, *Sermo* 313C.2.

⁹⁴ . . . *hoc docuit antequam faceret, hoc fecit quia iam docuerat.* Augustine, *Sermo* 313D.4.

⁹⁵ Ibid. 313D.2-4.

⁹⁶ Cf. Heffernan, 14, 19.

These important questions of historicity aside, what was the intent of the hagiographers as they communicated their *vitae* to the church? Already implicit in our discussion, the key purpose seems to be discipleship—teaching the church on the life of faith through concrete examples. Thus, to borrow from Augustine’s thought, truth (*res*) is more effectively understood and applied through a saint’s life than through propositional statements or eloquent communication (*verba*).⁹⁷ Not unlike many of the hagiographers surveyed to this point, Gregory of Tours announced his intentions at the outset of his *Vitae Patrum*: “to build up the church . . . the life of the saints not only opens up their intentions but also excites the minds of the listeners to emulate them.”⁹⁸ Though dismissing the *vitae* as legendary accounts, Delehaye also acknowledges their didactic value: “The saints show forth every virtue in superhuman fashion . . . they make every virtue attractive and ever invite Christians to seek it. Their life is indeed the concrete manifestation of the spirit of the Gospel . . .”⁹⁹

In light of the church’s mission and function to teach the community of faith, Heffernan regards hagiography as narratives or literary mosaics that actually served as catechetical tools. Comparing them to the Bible stories housed in the stained glass of medieval cathedrals, he concludes that “the primary social function of sacred biography . . . is to teach (*docere*) the truth of the faith through the principle of individual example.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Cf. Heffernan, 5, 32.

⁹⁸ English translation cited in Heffernan, 4.

⁹⁹ Cf. Delehaye, 181.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Heffernan, 19.

IV. Possidius' *Vita Augustini*

Possidius' *Vita Augustini* will be explored within the context of the general survey of patristic hagiography offered to this point, including its purposes, nature, and historical concerns. After considering the sources, general structure and content of the *Vita*, its continuity and uniqueness within the matrix of early church hagiography will be discussed toward making an argument for Possidius' purpose for writing.

Before moving to this discussion, a brief word must be said about the relationship between Possidius' *Vita* and Augustine's *Confessiones*. Probably written around 397 as a response to Paulinus of Nola's request for a testimony of Augustine's spiritual journey, *Confessiones* was a transparent account in which:

. . . Augustine confessed his sinful past¹⁰¹ but more significantly, "what I am now."¹⁰² The bishop of Hippo openly shared with his readers his struggle with lustful thoughts;¹⁰³ food and gluttony;¹⁰⁴ his fascination with sounds, shapes and colors;¹⁰⁵ a lust of the eyes;¹⁰⁶ pride;¹⁰⁷ and that he enjoyed the praise of men.¹⁰⁸

Despite some recent skepticism over Augustine's motives for writing *Confessiones*,¹⁰⁹ Augustine's readers— both clergy and the laity— must have identified with his struggle for purity related through his honest account. Indeed, such transparency attracted those who wanted to sojourn with Augustine in the journey of faith in the earthly city.

While Possidius certainly had a personal understanding of *Confessiones*, he was also aware of its wide readership in Africa and around the Mediterranean world.¹¹⁰ Thus, he writes: "I do not intend to recount everything that blessed Augustine has told us in his

¹⁰¹ *Confessiones* 1.5.6; 1.10.16; 1.13.21-2; 1.19.30; 2.2.2; 3.1.1; 2.4.9.

¹⁰² *Hic est fructus confessionum mearum, non quails fuerim, sed qualis sim. Confessiones* 10.4.6.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* 10.30.42.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 10.31.43, 45, 47.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 10.33.49-50; 10.34.51.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 10.35.54-7.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* 10.36.59.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* 10.37.61; Cf. Smither, 143-144.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine of Hippo: A New Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), 36.

¹¹⁰ As noted, the initial request for *Confessiones* came from Nola in Italy.

Confessiones, where he describes the kind of person he was before receiving grace [in baptism] and the kind of life he lived after receiving it.”¹¹¹ Though not a seamless sequel, Possidius intentionally seems to offer a complimentary account of *Confessiones*.

1. Sources

While Possidius certainly had a favorable bias toward Augustine, modern historians have a difficult time criticizing Possidius for his sources. Having shared the same living space with Augustine from 391 to 400, from 428 to 430, and having kept in close contact with the bishop of Hippo, Possidius’ *Vita* gains credibility because of his personal eyewitness accounts.¹¹² In the opening preface, Possidius aims to relate “what I saw of him and heard from him”¹¹³ and “what I learned from him and what I experienced myself in many years of close association with him.”¹¹⁴ For instance, Possidius was surely present in the church at Hippo when Augustine began to preach while still only a presbyter.¹¹⁵ Possidius also draws upon the eyewitness testimonies of others in his presentation.¹¹⁶ He further relies upon documentary evidence that included the records of public debates¹¹⁷ and Augustine’s own letters.¹¹⁸ Perhaps in contrast to the fanciful hagiographer, Possidius is forthright about what he cannot verify.¹¹⁹

That Possidius wrote the *Vita* shortly after Augustine’s death and based it on seemingly reliable sources certainly exonerates him from the criticism Delehayé has

¹¹¹ *Nec attingam ea omnia insinuare, quae idem beatissimus Augustinus in suis Confessionum libris de semetipso, qualis ante perceptam gratiam fuerit, qualisque iam sumpta viveret, designavit.* Possidius, Praef.5.

¹¹² Cf. Possidius, Praef.1; 15.1-6; 22.8; 24.5; 17; 28.13; 29.1-2; 31.1-3, 5.

¹¹³ . . . *quae in eodem vidi, ab eoque audivi* . . . Possidius, Praef.1.

¹¹⁴ . . . *quae per eum didici, et expertus sum, quam plurimis annis eius inhaerens caritati* . . . Possidius, Praef.3.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 5.3.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 4.1-3; 27.6, 9.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 6; 7; 24.7; 16.2-4; 17.6-7.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 8.5; 20.3; 30.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 15.5, 7.

leveled against hagiographers in general.¹²⁰ In fact, without mentioning Possidius, Delehayé gives some merit to Possidius' method of gathering sources and reporting.¹²¹ As we will show, Possidius' account is further strengthened when read in concert with Augustine's sermons and letters— sources and documents that are generally regarded as reliable. Thus, Rotelle concludes, “No one doubts the historical authenticity of the *Life of Augustine*,”¹²² while Vessey adds that it is “substantially reliable so far as it can be checked.”¹²³

2. Structure and Content

Trained in rhetoric and the art of eloquent communication, Augustine was a prolific writer and communicator who put those skills to use in some 117 books— many of which were persuasive and apologetic in nature.¹²⁴ Possidius, on the other hand, does not seem to have excelled as a preacher¹²⁵ and his communication in church councils— particularly exchanges with the Donatists— was concise and sometimes blunt.¹²⁶ These tendencies can also be observed in the *Vita*— a short text of only 12,000 words written in simple Latin.

(1) Introduction

Following a brief preface detailing his intentions, Possidius dedicates the first chapter to recounting Augustine's birth, family, conversion, and baptism. In chapter 2, Possidius reiterates Augustine's renunciation of his career and resolve to abandon the

¹²⁰ Cf. Delehayé, 70.

¹²¹ Ibid. 113.

¹²² Cf. Rotelle, 18.

¹²³ Cf. Vessey in Fitzgerald, 668.

¹²⁴ Cf. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* 4.2.3; 12.28.

¹²⁵ Cf. Brown, 266.

¹²⁶ Cf. Rotelle, 15.

world for an ascetic life.¹²⁷ As noted, he justifies the brevity of these two chapters by acknowledging his readers' familiarity with these biographical accounts in *Confessiones*. From this basis, Possidius does begin a sequel to *Confessiones* by revealing aspects that Augustine does not choose to address.¹²⁸ Apart from this introduction, chapters 3-18 and 27.6-31 can generally be considered chronological accounts, while chapters 19-27.5 are reflections within this chronological structure of Augustine's character.

(2) Initial Chronological Account (Chapters 3-18)

In chapter 3, Possidius recounts Augustine's return to Africa and the establishment of a monastery on his family's estate at Tagaste.¹²⁹ In the latter half of the chapter, Augustine makes his initial journey to Hippo to meet with a Roman official desiring to follow Christ and renounce the world.¹³⁰

Chapter 4 is devoted to Augustine's celebrated career change in 391 in which he was ordained against his will by Bishop Valerius. This passage is regarded as a trope by many scholars as Possidius places Augustine in line with Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, and Paulinus of Milan as holy men who resisted the ministry but ultimately yielded their own will to the high calling. Despite a sure bias on Possidius' part, the fact remains that prior to 391, Augustine was on no observable course for church ministry, while after 391, he remained in ministry for forty years. Also, Possidius' account seems to be confirmed by Augustine in *Sermo* 355.¹³¹

¹²⁷ These accounts are corroborated in *Confessiones* 8.12.30.

¹²⁸ The events of Possidius, 1-11 could have been treated in *Confessiones* as they occurred before its redaction in c. 397.

¹²⁹ Cf. Possidius, 3.1-2; and Smither, 197-204.

¹³⁰ Cf. Possidius, 3.3-5.

¹³¹ Cf. Augustine, *Sermo* 355.2; see also my argument in Edward Smither, "An Unlikely and Unrecognized Influence? The Impact of Valerius of Hippo on Augustine," *Irish Theological Quarterly* (October, 2007).

In chapter 5, we read that Valerius allows Augustine to continue in his monastic vision while serving as a presbyter and the Hippo garden monastery is founded.¹³² In the remainder of the chapter, Possidius discusses Valerius' controversial practice of allowing Augustine to preach before he had attained the office of bishop,¹³³ which is corroborated by Augustine's *Epistula* 29 and his sermon on the Creed given to the bishops at the council of Hippo in 393.

Possidius summarizes Augustine's ministry as an apologist against the Manicheans in chapters 6 and 7. This ministry, supported by sermons, teaching, and books, consequently served to strengthen the church in orthodoxy.¹³⁴ In chapter 8, Possidius recounts Augustine's promotion to co-bishop with Valerius in 395— another ordination that Augustine seemed to resist before complying.¹³⁵ Yet, Possidius correctly shows that Augustine was not in favor of Valerius' manner of ordaining clergy; such that he broke with this practice when he was made sole bishop of Hippo in c. 397.¹³⁶

In chapters 9-10 and 12-14, Possidius summarizes Augustine's interaction with the Donatists. While this contact included rather amicable debate through letters and personal encounters,¹³⁷ Possidius also notes the violence of the Circumcellion faction to which he was personally a victim.¹³⁸ Finally, Possidius records the imperial suppression of the Donatists, verified by the council of Carthage of 411; an action that Possidius interpreted as "unity and peace."¹³⁹

¹³² Cf. Possidius, 5.1; and Smither, "Principles of Mentoring," 204-208.

¹³³ Cf. Possidius, 5.2-5.

¹³⁴ Cf. Possidius, 7.2-4.

¹³⁵ This account is corroborated by Paulinus of Nola's *Epistula* 32 (in the corpus of Augustine's letters).

¹³⁶ Cf. Possidius, 8.5; and Augustine, *Epistulae* 126; 213.

¹³⁷ Cf. Possidius, 9; 14.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.* 10; 12.

¹³⁹ . . . *et multiplicabatur pacis unitas* . . . Possidius, 13.1.

In the context of these Donatist battles, Possidius in chapter 11 parenthetically mentions the clergy house (*monasterium clericorum*), which had been initiated by Augustine in 395 upon his consecration as co-bishop.¹⁴⁰ Possidius' point is to show that Augustine succeeded in training quality men within the monastery who then were sent as bishops to the churches of North Africa.¹⁴¹

In chapters 15-16, Possidius recounts further contacts Augustine had with the Manicheans, including a personal encounter with a certain Firmus who became a Christian¹⁴² as well as a public debate in Carthage that also resulted in Manicheans being converted.¹⁴³ Possidius concludes this chronological section in chapters 17-18 with a summary of Augustine's contacts and debates with Arians¹⁴⁴ and his writings and work in church councils dealing with the Pelagian controversy.¹⁴⁵

(3) Account of Augustine's Character in Ministry (Chapters 19-27.5)

While chronicling Augustine's career as a monk-bishop and defender of the church against heresy— an account repeatedly supported by other documents— Possidius comments on Augustine's holy character in carrying out this work. In chapter 19, Augustine is portrayed serving as a civil judge, a responsibility imposed upon bishops by the *Codex Theodosius*. Though other sources reveal that Augustine loathed this responsibility, Possidius indicates that Augustine persevered in this duty in order to influence the citizens of Hippo with a biblical perspective.¹⁴⁶ In chapter 20, Augustine is

¹⁴⁰ Cf. Possidius, 11; Augustine, *Sermo* 355.2; and Smither, "Principles of Mentoring," 208-220.

¹⁴¹ Cf. Possidius, 11.3; and Smither, "Principles of Mentoring," 218-220.

¹⁴² Cf. Possidius, 15.5-7.

¹⁴³ Ibid. 16.1-4.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. 17:1-7 which is corroborated by Augustine's *Epistulae* 238-239.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. Possidius, 18.1-5.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Possidius, 19.4; Augustine, *Epistulae* 33.5; 213.5; 24*.1; and Smither, "Principles of Mentoring," 187.

recorded successfully interceding for residents of Hippo before the Roman authorities.¹⁴⁷ In chapter 21, Possidius highlights Augustine's involvement in the African church councils in which he labored for the benefit of the church and its clergy.¹⁴⁸ Finally, in chapters 23 and 24, Possidius discusses two of Augustine's other roles as bishop—caring for the material needs of the poor and administering church property. He concludes that Augustine fulfilled these duties with care, integrity, and simplicity.

The remaining chapters in this section of the *Vita* reveal Augustine's monastic values of simplicity and holiness. In chapter 22, Possidius shows Augustine's modest dress and diet. Though meals were certainly not extravagant in the Hippo monastery, Possidius emphasizes Augustine's hospitality and table fellowship, including the famous warning about gossip: "Let those who like to slander the absent know that their own are not worthy at this table."¹⁴⁹ In chapter 25, Possidius highlights the Hippo monastery's discipline as monks were to refrain from swearing, were at times rebuked, and were constrained to regularly forgive one another. Similarly, in chapter 26, Possidius adds that significant efforts were made to limit contact with women. Under no circumstance was a woman allowed in the monastery and if a priest needed to visit a woman for the purpose of ministry, then he was required take another priest or bishop with him. In chapter 27.1-5, Possidius relates that Augustine, for the sake of holiness, refrained from visiting the women's monastery and refused social engagements such as dinner invitations.

¹⁴⁷ This account is confirmed by Augustine, *Epistulae* 152-155.

¹⁴⁸ Augustine probably took part in twenty-two church councils between 393-427. Cf. Smither, "Principles of Mentoring," 267-281; and Perler, 430-476.

¹⁴⁹ *Quisquis amat dictis absentum rodere vitam, Hanc mensam indignam noverit esse suam.* Possidius, 22.6.

(4) Second Chronological Account (Chapters 27.6-31)

The final section of the *Vita* is a chronological account of Augustine's final days, which also coincided with the Vandal conquest of Hippo in 430. As noted, Possidius, resident in Hippo from 428-430 wrote these final chapters based on his eyewitness accounts. In the remainder of chapter 27, Possidius begins to relate Augustine's final days by first considering Ambrose's experience in death as well as Cyprian's writings on entering eternity. At the outset of chapter 28, Possidius shows Augustine preparing not only for death but for the imminent Vandal siege by reviewing all of his books and publishing his *Retractationes* or "reconsiderations."¹⁵⁰ Possidius seemed to have been involved in this editing process, which of course included his *Indiculus* or index of Augustine's works that was appended to the *Vita*. The rest of chapter 28 details the horror and destruction caused by the Vandal movement eastward from Mauretania Caesarea toward Hippo in which Possidius himself was displaced and forced to flee to Hippo.¹⁵¹

Ironically, in chapter 29, as Augustine's health is declining, Possidius reports that a sick visitor came to Augustine for prayer and the ailing bishop responded by laying hands on him and successfully praying for his healing. Chapter 30 presents a unique parenthetical thought in the dying narrative as Possidius includes the full text of a letter written by Augustine to a bishop requesting wisdom on how clergy ought to respond to the Vandal persecution.¹⁵² In the rather lengthy response, which makes up one-fifth of the entire *Vita*, Augustine urges clergy not to abandon their congregations during persecution.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 28.1-3.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 28.4-13.

¹⁵² The letter is not in the collection of Augustine's letters and is believed to have been published by Possidius. Cf. Rotelle, 126.

In chapter 31, Possidius records Augustine’s last days— a time in which he ceased receiving visitors and concentrated on confession and prayer.¹⁵³ Employing an economy of words that characterizes the *Vita*, Possidius added: “Then, with all his bodily members still intact and with sight and hearing undiminished, as we stood by watching and praying, he fell asleep with his fathers (as the Scripture says) in a good old age.”¹⁵⁴ After that, Possidius reflected on Augustine’s legacy, which included his writings and his disciples— many of whom had become bishops in the African church.¹⁵⁵ Finally, Possidius concludes the *Vita* by reiterating his motives for writing, which will be dealt with in the next section.¹⁵⁶

3. Continuity with Patristic Hagiography

Possidius’ work stands clearly in the tradition of patristic hagiography for several reasons. First, he is noticeably biased toward his subject and his favorite descriptors for Augustine are “blessed” (*beatissimus*)¹⁵⁷ and “holy” (*sanctus*).¹⁵⁸ In this sense, his presentation of Augustine closely resembles Paulinus’ account of Ambrose. In portraying Augustine as a holy man in life and deed, Possidius also references him within a fraternity of other saints mentioned in the *Vita*— David, Cyprian, Athanasius, Valerius, and Ambrose.¹⁵⁹

Secondly, though Possidius has endeavored to present a chronological account, especially in chapters 3-18 and 27.6-31, this value gives way to the higher priority of

¹⁵³ Possidius, 31.1-3.

¹⁵⁴ *Membris omnibus sui corporis incolumis, integro aspectu atque auditu, et, ut scriptum est, nobis astantibus, et videntibus, et orantibus obdormivit cum patribus suis enutritus in bona senectute. . .* Possidius, 31.5.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. 31.6-8.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. 31.9-11.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. Praef.5; 11.3.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. Praef.6; 2.2; 6.4; 9.2; 12.9; 13.5; 16.2; 24.4; 24.6.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. 30.36 (David); 27.11 (Cyprian); 30.22 (Athanasius); 24.17 (Ambrose); 4.1; 5.2 (Valerius).

remembering Augustine's character. Thirdly, like other hagiographers surveyed, Possidius makes a claim to truthfulness by defending the merits of his endeavor as well as the reliability of his sources.¹⁶⁰ Fourth, his stated audience is also the church or communion of saints.¹⁶¹

With that, Possidius' work preserves the primary purpose of hagiography—presenting a concrete holy example that the church could imitate. In the preface to his work he states clearly, “I have tried to use whatever talents and literary powers I have for building up the holy and true catholic church of Christ the Lord.”¹⁶² Possidius' own resolve, articulated at the close of the *Vita* was “to emulate and imitate” Augustine—an invitation he surely gives to his readers in presenting Augustine's humility, simplicity, chastity, care for widows and the poor, high regard for the holy Scriptures among other character qualities.¹⁶³ Finally, Possidius is quite aware that he is writing within this ecclesiastical literary tradition and is content to offer his own contribution:

We know from our reading that other devout men belonging to our holy mother, the catholic church, have set themselves a similar task in the past. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, they have used voice or pen to convey, for the information of those desirous of hearing or reading, what they knew of the great and outstanding individuals who lived their lives in accordance with the Lord's grace that is given to all and who persevered in that grace until death.¹⁶⁴

4. Unique Features

Despite the *Vita Augustini*'s similarity to the corpus of patristic hagiography, it does seem to break with the genre in at least three areas. First, it is the most historically

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. Praef.3.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. Praef.4; 12.4-5; 14.7-8; 18.9; 21.1.

¹⁶² . . . *studens ex qualicumque accepto ingenio et sermone aedificationi prodesse sanctae ac verae Christi Domini catholicae Ecclesiae* . . . Possidius, Praef.1.

¹⁶³ Ibid. Praef.5-6; 31.1-2; 11.2; 22.1-8; 26; 27.3; 9.2; 2.1-2.

¹⁶⁴ *Id enim etiam ante nos factitatum fuisse a religiosissimis sanctae matris Ecclesiae catholicae viris legimus et comperimus, qui divino afflato Spiritu, sermone proprio atque stilo, et auribus et oculis scire volentium, dicendo et scribendo similia studiosorum notitiae intulerunt, quales quantique viri ex communi dominica gratia in rebus humanis, et vivere, et usque in finem obitus perseverare meruerint.* Possidius, Praef.2.

reliable of the *vitae* previously surveyed and winsomely stands up to the scrutiny raised by critics like Delehaye. Possidius' use of generally reliable sources— eyewitness accounts, documentary sources, and his appended *Induculus*¹⁶⁵ of Augustine's writings— seems to indicate that he understood the enduring historical value of his work. As Augustine was a careful theologian, exegete and philosopher, Possidius employs this same precision in his historical work.

Secondly, Possidius breaks with the hagiographical tradition because his *Vita* is quite practical, depicting a monk-bishop at work serving the church and combating heresy. In what Van der Meer described as “nothing very remarkable,” Possidius does purposely depart from the “divine, holy man” nature of the accounts of Antony, Martin, Perpetua, Paul, and Ambrose.¹⁶⁶ Most notably, Possidius' *Vita* contains only one miracle story— an aspect that has caused historians to be suspicious of Possidius as a hagiographer!¹⁶⁷ Yet, Possidius' work does seem faithful to Augustine's view of the miraculous— particularly as a basis for spiritual authority.¹⁶⁸ For instance, Augustine was concerned at one point that the *Passio* of Perpetua and Felicitas was being placed on par with the canonical Scriptures.¹⁶⁹ Though he did gain a greater appreciation for miracles and even relics as a part of worship later in his life, Augustine proceeded with caution and approached miracle accounts in a very empirical fashion.¹⁷⁰ Thus, Possidius frames his *Vita* with the principles of his mentor in mind.

¹⁶⁵ I am indebted to Thomas O'Loughlin's insights on the *Indiculus*, which he related to me in conversation.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Frederick Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop: Church and Society at the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, trans. B. Battershaw and G.R. Lamb, (London: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 274; and Hamilton, 93.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 88.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Possidius, 29.5.

¹⁶⁹ Cf. Heffernan, 193.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, 22.8; *Epistulae* 227; 29*; *Retractationes* 1.13.7; and Brown, 418-419.

Thirdly, though Possidius declared that his audience was the church, it seems that he was also aiming a bit more specifically and writing to its leadership, the clergy. In this sense, Possidius has an audience within an audience. As *Confessiones* was probably requested by a bishop, Paulinus of Nola, its primary readers were also clergy. Thus, when Possidius, in his preface, acknowledges that his readers were familiar with *Confessiones* and prepares his account in a complementary manner, he is probably primarily writing to those in ministry. With that, the focal point of Possidius' *Vita* is Augustine's holy work as a monk-bishop—defending orthodoxy, preaching, serving as a judge, caring for the poor, administering church property, etc.—an occupation that could most be appreciated by other clergy.¹⁷¹

Louis Hamilton argues that Possidius' focus is even more specific in that he aims to give clergy direction for leading the church in the midst of persecution brought on by the Vandal conquest.¹⁷² While Possidius alludes throughout the *Vita* to the instability of Roman Africa, the most compelling evidence is the inclusion of Augustine's entire letter to Honoratus in chapter 30, which answers queries on leading the church amidst such suffering. That Augustine's letter comprises one-fifth of Possidius' work certainly lends credence to Hamilton's thesis.

Having been a member of Augustine's clerical monastery in Hippo, Possidius certainly highlights Augustine's role as a mentor to emerging spiritual leaders who would go on to serve as deacons, presbyters, and bishops in the North African church.¹⁷³ Having benefited from Augustine's training and preparation in the monastic context, Possidius of course served for over thirty years as the bishop of Calama. Hence, it seems quite

¹⁷¹ Cf. Hamilton, 96-97.

¹⁷² Ibid. 86, 96.

¹⁷³ Cf. Possidius, 11.3.

plausible that Possidius would continue Augustine’s mentoring legacy to spiritual leaders by writing up an ordered and practical account that the clergy— especially those struggling to lead their churches in persecution— could be encouraged by and of course, imitate.

V. Conclusion: Possidius, Augustine, and *imitatio*

Possidius’ *Vita Augustini*, a largely under valued presentation of Augustine’s life and ministry, stands clearly in the tradition of patristic hagiography. Yet, Possidius, while certainly biased in commemorating his mentor, diverges from the miraculous “divine-man” narratives of the third and fourth centuries and offers a practical account of a bishop serving the church in the midst of the fall of Roman Africa. While Possidius’ *Vita* is certainly intended for the church, he seems to be primarily inviting other clergy to “imitate and emulate” Augustine in uncertain times.

Though Possidius’ primary purpose in writing— encouraging imitation and emulation of Augustine’s example— is consistent with the aims of patristic hagiography, imitation was also a key discipleship value for Augustine. His monastic program, which followed in the tradition of Pachomius and Basil where the group itself was the key means of spiritual growth for individuals,¹⁷⁴ was dependent upon Augustine’s disciples observing his tangible holiness in the daily context of the monastery and church at Hippo. That Augustine stayed in regular contact with Hippo alumni such as Alypius and Possidus, not only testified to his relational nature but to his ongoing personal mentoring that required imitation.¹⁷⁵ As we have shown in the summaries of Augustine’s sermons on Cyprian, he preached the virtues of the Christian life by holding up for imitation the

¹⁷⁴ Cf. Smither, “Principles of Mentoring,” 66-107.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 283-285.

concrete example of such a Christian, bishop, and martyr. In fact, as I have argued elsewhere, a further examination of Augustine's writings shows that *imitatio* was probably his most cherished value in discipleship.¹⁷⁶ Thus, in one sense, Possidius has carried on Augustine's principle of mentoring others, especially spiritual leaders, through telling Augustine's story and inviting his readers to imitate Augustine.

Ironically, apart from the *Indiculus*, the *Vita* tells us virtually nothing of Augustine's work as a theologian or philosopher, which seems to indicate that Possidius regarded Augustine as a servant to the church more than a thinker. Augustine himself reflected these pastoral priorities in a terse reply in c. 410—the same year that the Vandals sacked Rome—to a student posing questions on Cicero:

For when I consider how a bishop is distracted and overwrought by the cares of his office clamoring on every side, it does not seem to me proper for him suddenly, as if deaf, to withdraw himself from all these, and devote himself to the work of expounding to a single student some unimportant questions in the Dialogues of Cicero.¹⁷⁷

It seems that Possidius' pastoral focus, not to mention the *Vita*'s membership in the largely disregarded corpus of hagiography, explains why most Augustinian scholars have not given serious regard to the *Vita Augustini*. Thus, it has been the goal of this paper to call for a respectful re-reading of Possidius with appreciation for its historical value as well as its aims to promote spiritual growth within the church and in the lives of its leaders.

¹⁷⁶ Cf. Smither, "Principles of Mentoring," 310-314.

¹⁷⁷ *Non enim decora facies rerum attingit sensum meum, cum cogito episcopum ecclesiasticis curis circumstrepentibus districtum atque distentum, repente quasi obsurdescentem cohibere se ab his omnibus, et dialogorum Tullianorum quaestiunculas uni scholastico exponere.* Augustine, *Epistula* 118.1.2. English translation is from *New Advent* [website] <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102118.htm> (accessed September 28, 2007).

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