

David Vopřada, *Quodvultdeus: a Bishop Forming Christians in Vandal Africa. A Contextual Analysis of the Pre-Baptismal Sermons attributed to Quodvultdeus of Carthage*, Praha 2019, 333pp.

This thesis is beautifully written, carefully researched, filled with appropriate and nuanced discussions which are the result of a well-developed methodology, and written to develop a properly theological perspective on the homilies of Quodvultdeus of Carthage as he prepared candidates for baptism in a time of change and conflict.

But let me go back and review the basis for that rather broadly-expressed and affirming statement. The thesis begins, naturally, with an overview of previous studies, highlighting the fact that the theological dimensions of the sermons of Quodvultdeus – and therefore of his ministry – have not been given adequate attention. Noticing, from the outset, that the mystagogical dimensions of his pre-baptismal catechesis require an exploration of the theological background and foundation of that effort, he sets a strategy (or methodology) that will allow for a step-by-step process of research and exposition. By setting the life and work of Quodvultdeus within its historical and cultural contexts, it is possible to undertake a detailed analysis of the individual works, thus ‘setting the stage’ for the crux of the thesis: its exposition of the significance of his ministry in terms of its view of church as he educated its members-to-be – as well as the existing community – in how to live for the truth revealed in Christ.

Part I begins with a chapter on the historical context for the homilies of Quodvultdeus; it is rich in detail and quite demanding in its evaluation of the impact of the Vandals on the preaching itself. It ‘felt like’ being a student again and learning how to re-read the signs of those times through new details – but especially on the basis of some new ways of asking questions about the limited historical data. The significance of the Carthaginian fascination with games and of the ongoing survival and success of paganism were both overcome by the Arian imposition of rule and of theology imposed by the Vandals – led by Geiseric – in their invasion of Roman Africa and their persecution of Catholic Christians.

A discussion of the life and work of Quodvultdeus follows, along with a carefully-nuanced discussion of the North African tradition of preparation for baptism (chapters 2 and 3). That chapter lays the foundation for a presentation of the distinctive dimensions of the catechesis of Quodvultdeus – explicitly avoiding the temptation to fill in the gaps by recourse to practices from other areas or preachers.

Part II discusses the individual homilies, with particular attention to their mystagogical dimensions. In the introduction to this part of the thesis, he wrote: “I consider it essential to analyse these sermons first as such and not to use them straight away for conclusions regarding Quodvultdeus’s liturgy or theology.” (p. 138) Chapters 4, 5 and 6 discuss the homilies in considerable detail, noticing differences and similarities between the baptismal preparation in Carthage and Hippo, for example. But the focus is on the homilies themselves which address specific moments of the pre-baptismal process. For example, in the discussion of *De symbolo* III, he notes the position of one author who says that it was a ‘mere echo’ (p. 185) of the first two homilies on the Creed and then proceeds to show how different it really is when seen from the point of view of its being a mystagogy of faith. That mystagogical work does harken back to the extensive work already published on the preaching of Ambrose as mystagogy, but, more importantly, it affirms the deeply ecclesiological vision of Quodvultdeus and his careful attention to the relationship to Christ. Such passages are rather typical of this whole work. Quodvultdeus’ attacks on Vandal views and on their progressive invasion views signal the approach of danger and appear to help with approximate dating.

Part III is, of course, the place where the principle threads of the previous chapters and explorations can be drawn into that which this thesis wanted to prove. Thus are the ecclesiological and protection-from-error-and-evil themes rightly highlighted. As to the first, it is noteworthy that the emphasis is on the importance of the cross of Christ rather than (as for Augustine) on the incarnation of Christ (p. 228). That surely signals how culturally-connected his teaching was – a significant dimension of the work of this thesis where the catechesis is consistently tied to the time, place and context in theologically-sensitive ways.

With regard to the oft-expressed focus on Quodvultdeus' efforts to protect his people by strengthening their attachment to Christ, the ongoing influence of Augustine's teaching on the whole Christ is a clear background and framework (p. 230). "Not only does a heresy make one alien to the Church, it also hinders him in knowing the true Christ and God, and obstructs his path of entering into the mystery of Christ." (p. 302-3) Notably, it is also clear that the focus on dissident and erroneous views is done for the Christian community and not in the midst of a polemical debate.

Given the relatively limited quantity of available texts on which to build an understanding of the work and impact of Quodvultdeus on his time, this thesis is a significant piece of scholarship. It is faithfully grounded in the work (also limited) of other scholars and helpful in its insistence on a pastoral-theological perspective in its unfolding. The ample bibliographical dimensions also show a willingness and an ability to reach beyond studies that are fully-centered on Quodvultdeus. It is clearly-organized, allowing the reader to follow the development rather comfortably.

From the point of view of this reader, this is a remarkable work that is not only worthy of publication and of further study but also an excellent basis for habilitation.

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