ST AUGUSTINE'S *RULE*.

THE Rev. Vincent McNabb, O.P., has put forward in the *JOURNAL* for April (pp. 242 ff) the interesting suggestion that this *Regula* was written for St Melania the Younger. He wisely remarks that 'in matters where evidence is so lacking, it would be wrong to claim certainty'—an observation which I shall make my own in offering a few comments upon his arguments.

(a) All we can gather from the letter itself (*Ep.* 211) about the occasion which called it forth amounts to very little. We learn from Section 4 that the sisters desired to change their *praeposita* ('non desiderabitis mutare praepositam'), and that in some way the *praepositus* was connected with this agitation ('si propter illum quaeritis novitatem et in eius invidia contra matrem uestram rebellastis'). Augustine does not 'suggest that rather than rid themselves of their *praeposita* or sister-superior, they should rid themselves of their new *praepositus*', as Mr McNabb says, but (note the emphatic position of 'propter illum' and 'in eius invidia') that *if* it be for some reason connected with him that they desire a change, they should, in that case, seek to have him, the newcomer, transferred. Thus we cannot be certain that the *praepositus* was actually responsible for the agitation; besides, the injunction in Part II of the Letter ('Praepositae tamquam matri oboediatur . . . multo magis presbytero') does not really conflict with this first Part, being merely a general statement that the authority of the ordained priest was to be considered above that of the lay sister-superior. But that fact is of less importance than this other, that it is extremely unlikely that Melania's nuns would rise against her and desire that she should be changed; we remember that the monks and nuns in the monasteries founded by Melania 'were drawn from her enfranchised slaves of yesterday' (Goyau, *Ste Mélanie* p. 113, cited by Mr McNabb p. 245).

(b) Further, this *praeposita* had been in the monastery for a considerable time (*Ep.* 211, 4 'tam multos annos' and again 'tot annos'); with Mr McNabb we find it 'difficult to see how St Melania could be said to "have been many years" in their midst'. The *praeposita* had been first subordinate to Augustine's own sister ('sanctae praepositae sorori meae seruientem, placentem') and later had herself become *praeposita*. Mr McNabb does not make it clear whether he means the words 'sorori meae' to be taken of Melania i.e. 'my sister in the Lord',

or whether Melania is the *praeposita* against whom the nuns rebelled. The former is most unlikely, for on the testimony of Possidius, Augustine actually had a sister who was for long a *praeposita* (*Vita* 32 'Germana soror, quae uidua Deo seruiens multo tempore usque in diem obitus sui praeposita ancillarum Dei uixit'), and she is beyond doubt the *soror* mentioned in this letter; on the other hand it is very improbable that Melania should be the *praeposita* who succeeded Augustine's sister, not only for the reason given under (a), but because Melania's chronology cannot at all square with that of this mother-superior, for Melania was in Africa only between six and seven years (410-417).¹

(c) Again, the fact that Augustine wrote a letter instead of going in person to the monastery is no reason for removing it to Tagaste. We learn from Possidius that it was only for the gravest reasons that Augustine visited these places (*Vita* 33 'Feminarum . . . monasteria nonnisi urgentibus necessitatibus uisitabat'). Whatever the squabble may appear to us, it may not have been regarded as an 'urgens necessitas' by Augustine. Further, the tumult, he says, 'etsi oculos meos latuit, tamen aures meas uestris uocibus uerberauit' (*Ep.* 211, 1). Surely this is too strong an expression to be taken otherwise than literally. The nunnery must have been close to his own house: how could nuns at Tagaste have reasonably clamoured for his actual presence (*Ep.* 211, 1), in a town, too, outside his own diocese? Besides the omission of a superscription to the letter (see Goldbacher's edition) implies that the letter-carrier was simply told by word of mouth where he was to go with it,² and that his destination was near at hand. Augustine wrote, too, because his desire was that this *Regula* should be permanent, as we see from the closing paragraph (the Rule to be read to the community once a week). The location of the nunnery at Hippo is further rendered probable by the fact that Augustine seems to have been directly responsible for its foundation:

(1) he has the right of inflicting punishment ('quomodo . . . im-punitum relinquerem (tumultum uestrum)')? (*Ep. cit.* 1.)

(2) Soleo gaudere de uobis et inter tanta scandala . . . consolari etc. (*Ep. cit.* 2); haec in uobis bona, haec Dei dona considerans . . . cor meum solet . . . adquiescere (*Ep. cit.* 3). These shew the joy of the founder at its increase and wellbeing. And more definite still:

(3) non enim sic plantaui et rigaui hortum dominicum in uobis ut spinas metamus istas ex uobis (*Ep. cit.* 3). Nothing could be stronger or more definite than this.

¹ These are the dates given by Cardinal Rampolla in his *S. Melania giuniora* . . . Rome, 1905; I take them from Lejay's review in the *Revue d'hist. et de litt. religieuses* xi (1906) p. 246.

² I owe this suggestion to Prof. Souter.

Besides, the whole tone of the letter is that of one in authority, the Principal as it were, whose influence and word counted for everything. Augustine could hardly have adopted the same tone, I imagine, if writing to a monastery which was not of his own foundation, nor in his own diocese; and while we know that Augustine with others influenced the Melanias in their endowment of certain monastic houses in Africa, there is no evidence that Melania's plan of building those at Tagaste owes anything to him.¹

(d) The great increase in the number of nuns in this house does not need to be attributed to Melania to be made 'more pointed' or 'more intelligible'. It is well known that in Augustine's time the number of monastic houses in Africa grew immensely, the names—a few out of many—of Uzala, Thabraca, Satafi, Tucca, Theveste, Ucchi Maius² sufficiently attesting the growth of the monastic spirit among women. It is surely probable at least that with the increase of monastic houses, there was a corresponding increase in the numbers in each house, and that the house in question was sufficiently famous from its connexion with Augustine not to require for its growth the prestige of Melania. The phrase 'sub illa multiplicatae' need not mean any more than that it was during this *praeposita's* tenure of office that the increase took place, and not that it was due to her (cf. the accompanying phrases 'sub illa eruditae' and 'sub illa uelatae', where the 'sub' has the same meaning, namely 'during her rule'). Hence I would take the words 'nec erigant ceruicem quia sociantur eis ad quas foris accedere non audebant' to be a general warning against pride, such as is so frequently met with in monastic writings, and not to refer specially to the patrician Melania. There were in this monastery women of means as well as poor, but the rich women had hardly, as Mr McNabb says, 'made it possible for the poorer sisters to dwell in the monastery'. The words used by Augustine ('nec extollantur si communi uitae de suis facultatibus' aliquid contulerunt') shew only that those who could, contributed to the common fund. In attributing 'this state of riches and poverty to the nuns under the rule of Augustine's sister', we are merely surmising that there, as in all other monasteries, were found both rich and poor, and that the principle of having 'all things in common', derived of course from the earliest days of Christianity and continuing through all monastic history, was in use there too.

¹ See *Vita S. Melaniae Jun.* in *Anal. Bolland.* viii (1889) p. 35, sections 20 and 22, and other authorities.

² See list in Mesnage *Le Christianisme en Afrique, origines*, etc., Alger-Paris, 1914, pp. 291 ff. and authorities there cited.

³ The language here, as Prof. Souter pointed out to me, is influenced by Luke viii 3 '... et aliae multae, quae ministrabant eis de facultatibus suis'.

With the disappearance from this letter of the phrase which was employed by the Benedictine editors, Tillemont, and others, to fix its date,¹ it becomes a hard task to assign it to any definite period of Augustine's life ; with the formerly accepted date of 423, there was still less reason to suppose that the *Regula* was written for St Melania, for she was then in Palestine ; yet it seems to me that the foregoing arguments hardly require the assistance of this dating to make it clear that the *Regula* was not written for her. And, I may add, it appears to me equally unlikely that the *praeposita* and the *praepositus* in question are the Felicitas and Rusticus of Letter 210, though this is suggested by the Benedictines ; a careful reading of both letters will shew, I think, that the circumstances of each, while to a considerable degree similar, are yet hardly identical.

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¹ The phrase is 'cum de Donatistis in unitate gaudeamus' (*Ep. cit.* 4). Goldbacher's edition shews that 'de Deo natis', instead of 'Donatistis', is the unanimous reading of the MSS. For a similar case of the disappearance of a proper name from a text, and a 'ghost'-personality from the *Dict. of Christian Biography*, see Prof. Souter's *Study of Ambrosiaster* p. 169.