

THE AUGUSTINIAN SERIES

VOLUME I

**The Life  
of  
Saint Augustine**

by

Possidius  
Bishop of Calama

Introduction and Notes

by

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Part II

Augustine's Everyday Life

(Chapters 19 — 27, 5)



*Saint Augustine* by Michael Pacher, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, West Germany.

## Augustine as Judge

1 Augustine also obeyed the instruction of the Apostle, who says: *When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare seek judgment from the wicked and not from the saints? Are you not aware that the saints will judge the world? And if you shall judge the world, are you unworthy to pass judgment in trifling matters? Are you not aware that we shall judge angels? How much more, then, the things of the world! If you have disputes about worldly things among you, appoint as your judges those who count least in the Church! I say this to shame you. Is there no wise person among you who can judge between brother and brother? Must a brother go to court against a brother, and this before unbelievers?* (1 Corinthians 6:1-6).<sup>1</sup>

2 Consequently, whenever Christians or even persons from one or other sect appealed to him,<sup>2</sup> he listened to the case with diligent care, having always in mind the words of the man who said he preferred to judge between people unknown to him rather than between his friends because if he judged equitably between people unknown to him he had a chance of acquiring a friend, whereas in judging between his friends he was sure to lose whichever one he declared to be in the wrong. 3 Sometimes he heard cases right up to the dinner hour, sometimes he fasted the entire day, but he always examined the facts and passed judgment with an eye on the movements of Christian souls, that is, considering how each party was advancing or falling off in faith and morals. 4 He took the opportunity of teaching both parties the truth of God's law and bringing it home to them and of reminding them of the means of obtaining eternal life. The only return he sought for the sacrifice of his time was the Christian obedience and devotion that is owed

to God and one's fellow human beings. Sinners he rebuked in the presence of all, so that the rest might learn to fear (see 1 Timothy 5:20).<sup>5</sup> In all this he thought of himself as a watchman set by the Lord over the house of Israel (Ezekiel 3:17; 33:7); he preached the word in season and out of season, convincing, exhorting, rebuking, and teaching with unflinching patience (2 Timothy 4:2), and taking special care to teach in turn those fitted for teaching others (2 Timothy 2:2).<sup>6</sup> When asked by some to take a hand in their temporal concerns, he wrote letters to various persons for them,<sup>3</sup> but he regarded this occupation as a kind of forced labor that took him away from more important things. His real delight was to speak of the things of God, whether in public addresses or at home in familiar converse with his brothers.

#### Notes

1. Augustine cites this passage in rebuking the faithful in *Expositions of the Psalms* 80, 21 and *Handbook on Faith, Hope, and Charity* 78.

2. According to G. Bardy, *Saint Augustin. L'homme et l'oeuvre* (Paris: Bibliotheque Augustinienne, 1940<sup>3</sup>), 179, "it was natural that the bishops should at all times serve as judge for the faithful, and Emperor Constantine had officiously acknowledged their jurisdiction over the members of their dioceses. He had gone even further and authorized all litigants, Christian or non-Christian, to have recourse to the episcopal court if they thought this appropriate. Later laws had further defined the competence of these courts, limiting it somewhat in the process. Despite this, the episcopal courts were not any the less frequented at the end of the fourth and beginning of the fifth century by a throng of people who preferred its speedy and simplified procedures to the often prolonged and expensive formalities of the civil courts." Augustine often laments the burden of this office, or at least alludes to it; see, for example, *The Work of Monks* 37 (published in about 400), where he again cites, in part, 1 Corinthians 6:1-6; the sermon referred to in Letter 213 (from the year 426); *Expositions of the Psalms* 25, 13; 118, 24, 3; Letter 33, 5; 48, 1; Sermon 355, 3; and see Van der Meer 258-261.

3. This was the purpose of Letters 113-116. To see what this work of charity cost the bishop and the spirit in which he did it see Sermon 302, 17. In any case, bishops regarded this kind of "intercession" as a pastoral duty; see Ennodius, *Life of Saint Epiphanius* 50.

## CHAPTER 20

### Dealings with the Authorities

1 We know, too, that when persons very dear to him asked him for letters of petition to the civil authorities he refused. He chose, he said, to follow the principle of a wise man of whom it was reported that regard for his own reputation kept him from doing many favors for friends. Augustine added that authorities who grant favors usually become importunate.

2 When he did decide that he ought to mediate, he did it in such an honorable and restrained way that, far from seeming a burden and annoyance to the authorities, he even roused their admiration. On one occasion, for example, in a case of necessity he intervened in writing for people who were petitioning a vicar for Africa named Macedonius.<sup>1</sup> The latter granted the favor and sent this answer:

3 "I greatly admire your wisdom as shown both in the works you have published and in this letter of recommendation which you have not felt it too much trouble to send for someone in distress. 4 The published works display an unsurpassable insight, knowledge, and holiness, and this letter such modesty that if, deservedly venerated Lord and esteemed Father, I did not grant your request, I would feel the fault lay in myself and not in the favor asked. 5 For you do not insist, as most men in your position do, on extorting from me whatever the distressed parties want. Rather, you suggest what you think may be asked from a judge beset by so many cares, and you do it with that accommodating modesty that is so effective in settling difficulties among good people. Therefore I immediately granted the desire of those you recommended; for I had given you reason to expect that I would."

## Notes

1. Macedonius was head of the Roman "diocese" of Africa. As is clear from the exchange of letters (Letters 152 and 154 among the letters of Augustine were written by Macedonius; Letters 153 and 155 by Augustine), the bishop had intervened, probably in 414, in favor of some persons who were under indictment, and Macedonius had immediately granted his wish. Macedonius then asked Augustine for help in resolving a doubt about how the guilty were to be treated; Augustine sent a lengthy answer and received in reply a letter of which Possidius cites approximately the first third here. Along with his letter Augustine had sent Macedonius the first three books of his *The City of God*, which he had written during the previous year. These were the "works" to which Macedonius is referring in the passage cited by Possidius. Macedonius' letter of admiration for the bishop elicited a reply in which the latter rejected the encomium and explained at length in what true wisdom and virtue consist and how they are God's gifts.

## CHAPTER 21

## Councils and Ordinations

1 He took part whenever he could in the councils which the holy bishops held in various provinces. He looked out not for his own interests but for the interests of Jesus Christ.<sup>1</sup> 2 I mean by this that he labored, for example, to preserve unstained the faith of the holy Catholic Church and to see to it that various priests and clerics who had been rightly or wrongly excommunicated should be either absolved or cast out. 3 When it came to ordaining priests and clerics he believed it his duty to respect the consensus of the majority of Christians<sup>2</sup> and the custom of the Church.

## Notes

1. See 2:21.
2. This was in accordance with the practice of the Church, a practice confirmed by canon 6 of the Council of Nicaea.

## Simplicity of Life and Freedom of Spirit Charity Above All

1 His clothing and shoes, and even his bedding, were simple and appropriate, being neither overly fastidious nor slovenly. It is in these externals that people usually go in either for arrogant display or for self-abasement; in either case they seek not the interests of Jesus Christ but their own (see Philippians 2:21). Augustine, however, as I just indicated, followed the middle way and did not deviate to right or left (see Numbers 20:17).<sup>1</sup>

2 His meals were frugal and economical; at times, however, in addition to herbs and vegetables they included meat for the sake of guests<sup>2</sup> or sick brethren. Moreover, they always included wine, for he knew and taught, with the Apostle, that *everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving; for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer* (1 Timothy 4:4-5). 3 Holy Augustine expressed the same thought in his *Confessions*<sup>3</sup> when he said: "It is the uncleanness of gluttony that I fear, not unclean meat. For I know that Noe was allowed to eat all kinds of meat that were suitable as food (Genesis 9:24); that Elias was fed on meat (1 Kings 17:16); and that John the Baptist, remarkable ascetic though he was, was not polluted by the flesh of living creatures, the locusts which were granted him as food (Matthew 3:4). On the other hand, I know that Esau was defrauded by his greed for a dish of lentils (Genesis 25:29-34); that David reproached himself for longing for a drink of water (2 Samuel 23:15-17); and that Christ our King was tempted not by meat but by bread (Matthew 4:3). And the people in the desert deserved rebuke, not because they wanted meat, but because in their greed for food they sulked



Augustine teaches charity: "Let those who like to slander the lives of the absent know that their own are not worthy of this table" (Wandereisen Engravings, 1631).

and grumbled against the Lord (Numbers 11:1ff).” 4 As regards the drinking of wine, the Apostle says in his letter to Timothy: *No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments* (1 Timothy 5:23).<sup>4</sup>

5 Only the spoons were of silver; the vessels in which the food was brought to the table were of earthenware, wood, or marble, and this not by unavoidable poverty but by deliberate policy (Philemon 14).<sup>5</sup>

6 He practiced hospitality at all times. Even at table he found more delight in reading<sup>6</sup> and conversation than in eating and drinking.

To prevent one plague that afflicts social intercourse he had these words inscribed on the table: “Let those who like to slander the lives of the absent know that their own are not worthy of this table.”<sup>7</sup> In this way he reminded all his guests that they ought to abstain from unnecessary and harmful gossip.

7 On one occasion, when some fellow bishops, close friends of his, had forgotten the inscription and disobeyed its warning, he rebuked them sternly, being so upset as to say that either the verses must be erased from the table or he would get up from table in the middle of the meal and retire to his room. I and others at that meal witnessed this.

#### Notes

1. In Harnack’s interpretation, Possidius is here defending Augustine against the charge that his community did not practice the rigorous asceticism customary in monasteries. It is to be noted, however, that the standards of moderation set down here were well known in ascetical teaching (see, for example, Cassian, *Institutes* I, 2) and that with regard to meat and wine in particular Augustine was reacting against the Manichees who forbade their use on the grounds that they had their origin in the evil principle (see, for example, *The Manichean Way of Life* II, 35). A witness to the lively reaction which this teaching aroused even in ascetical circles can be found in the Prologue to *The Lausiac History* of Palladius. The First and Second Councils of Braga (561 and 572) prescribed that clerics who did not eat meat should at least eat vegetables that were cooked together with meat, lest they become suspect of Priscillianism. On life in Augustine’s household see Van der Meer, pages 235-241.

2. Augustine considered it the duty of a bishop to show hospitality to visitors or people passing through; he even gives this as the reason for establishing his monastery right in the episcopal palace, namely, in order that the life of the monastery in the stricter sense of this term might not be disturbed by visitors (see Sermon 355, 2).

3. *Confessions* 10, 31, 46.

4. Saint Epiphanius of Pavia likewise justified the moderate use of wine with an appeal to this passage (see Ennodius, *Life of Saint Epiphanius* 48).

5. Dishes made of silver were fairly common in the imperial age. Of Saint Caesarius of Arles we are likewise told that among his table utensils only the spoons were of silver (*Life of Caesarius of Arles* I, 27).

6. Cassian, a contemporary of Saint Augustine, attributes the introduction of reading at table to the Cappadocian monks (that is, to Saint Basil, who wrote their Rule) (see Cassian, *Institutes* IV, 17). While at Saint Augustine’s table reading alternated with conversation, Saint Caesarius of Arles prescribed uninterrupted reading at dinner and supper; when the reading was finished, some one had to report on what had been read.

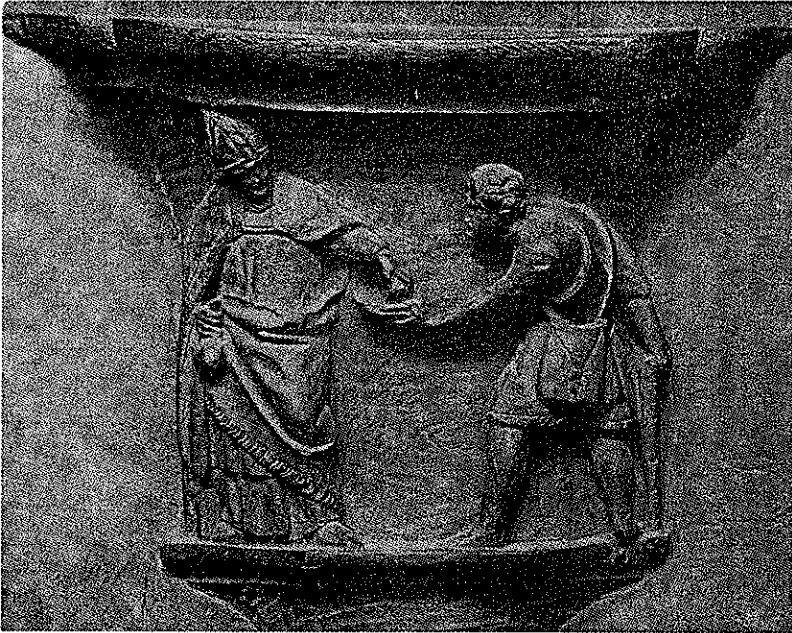
7. Possidius does not say who wrote these two lines of verse, which are also to be found in the *Latin Anthology*, no. 487a. According to some scholars, Augustine tells us that he himself wrote them, but the claim is based on a spurious sermon (*To the Brethren in the Desert* 26); it is, of course, possible that he did indeed write them.

## Disinterested Charity

1 He was always mindful of his fellow poor and distributed to them from the same source on which he and those living with him depended: the income from the Church's property and the offerings of the faithful. 2 And if, as often happens, this property stirred envy of the clergy,<sup>1</sup> he would tell the people<sup>2</sup> that he would prefer to live on the offerings of God's people rather than be bothered with the care and administration of the property and that he was ready to renounce it, so that all the servants and ministers of God might live as we read in Old Testament, where those who served the altar shared in the sacrificial offerings (see Deuteronomy 18:1-8; 1 Corinthians 9:13). But the laity were never willing to follow this course.

### Notes

1. Some have interpreted the passage as referring to envy among the clergy themselves, who supposedly rebuked the bishop for giving too much to the poor and too little to them. But the interpretation given here is the only one that fits the context.
2. For example, in Sermons 355 and 356.



*Augustine gives to the poor* by Mathieu de Wayerre, from the choir stalls of the Church of Saint Gertrude, Louvain, Belgium — the sculptures date from 1538-1543.

### Administration of the Church's Property

1 The administration of the house attached to the church<sup>1</sup> and of all its possessions he used to delegate to the more capable among the clergy,<sup>2</sup> letting each of them have the task in turn. He never kept the key or wore the ring.<sup>3</sup> Instead, those in charge of the house kept a record of all income and expenditures and gave an account of it to him at the end of the year, so that he might know how much had been received and how much spent, and how much remained to be spent. In many matters he simply took the word of the person in charge and did not require detailed and documented accounts.

2 He refused ever to buy a house or field or villa, but if someone made a spontaneous gift of such to the Church or left it as a legacy, he did not refuse it but ordered its acceptance. 3 We know indeed that he did at times refuse inheritances; the reason, however, was not that they would be useless to the poor but that he thought it only right and just for the children or parents or relatives of the dead to have them, even though the dead had been unwilling to leave them in that way.<sup>4</sup>

4 One of the honored citizens of Hippo, who was then residing in Carthage, wished to give some property to the Church of Hippo; he drew up the deed, in which he reserved only the income for himself, and of his own accord sent it to Augustine of holy memory. The latter gladly accepted the offering and congratulated the man on his concern for his eternal salvation. 5 A few years later, however, when I happened to be living in close association with Augustine, the donor sent his son with a letter asking that the deed be returned to the son and directing that



instead a hundred gold pieces be given to the poor. 6 When the holy man learned of this he was grieved that the donor had either only pretended to make the gift or had repented of his good work. In pain of spirit at this perverse action, he rebuked and chided the man in whatever words God suggested to his heart. 7 He immediately returned the deed, which the man had sent of his own accord without anyone desiring or demanding it, and he spurned the money as well. He also felt bound to rebuke and correct the man in writing, warning him to do humble penance before God for his pretense or wickedness, lest he depart from this world with such a serious sin on his conscience.

8 Augustine often observed that the Church can much more securely and safely accept legacies left by the deceased than inheritances, which are likely to bring anxiety and loss; and that even legacies are to be offered rather than requested.

9 Nor would he himself ever accept property to be held in trust, but he did not forbid clerics willing to do so.

10 He did not allow his heart to become attached to or entangled in the possessions of the Church. But while his attention and concern were focused rather on the more important things of the spirit, he did at times turn his thoughts from eternal things and bring them down to temporal affairs. 11 Once these had been arranged in orderly fashion, he would withdraw from them as from stings and annoyances and return to the interior, higher things of the mind, either studying the things of God or dictating something of what he had discovered or correcting what had been written at his dictation. This he did in laborious days and nights filled with toil. 12 In this he resembled that most devout woman, Mary, who is a type of the heavenly Church and of whom we read that she sat at the Lord's feet and listened intently to his words. And when her sister complained that though she had so much serving to do Mary did not help her, she was told: *Martha, Martha, Mary has chosen the better part, and it shall not be taken from her* (Luke 10:39).<sup>5</sup>

13 Augustine never had any desire for new buildings; he thus avoided any preoccupation with them, for he wanted to keep his soul free of all temporal anxieties. He did not, however, forbid others to build them, provided they were not extravagant.

14 When from time to time the Church was without money, he would tell the Christian people that he had nothing to give to the poor. 15 For the sake of prisoners and a large number of needy people he even ordered the sacred vessels to be broken and melted down. 16 I would not mention this if I did not know that it offends the carnal judgment of some people. But that very course of action is the one that Ambrose of revered memory said and wrote should undoubtedly be followed in such cases of need.<sup>6</sup>

17 At times, too, when speaking to the faithful in church he would admonish them for neglecting the poor box and the collection for the sacristy,<sup>7</sup> which supplied the needs of the altar; on one occasion he told us that in his presence blessed Ambrose had dealt with the same subject in church.

#### Notes

1. The reference is to the monastery in which the bishop resided with the clergy who shared common life with him; in Sermon 355, 2, it is called *domus episcopi* or "bishop's house" (according to Lambot's reading; others read *episcopii*).
2. Canon IV (20) of the Statutes of the Early Church (from Gaul, late fifth century) prescribed that "the bishop is not to take on any of the cares of the house but is to devote himself solely to the word of God and prayer." From what Possidius goes on to say here, it appears that there was a single administrator or steward at a time, who held his office for a year, as in the plan drawn up while Augustine was still in Milan (*Confessions* 4, 14, 24).
3. A signet ring was used to mark things as one's own or to authenticate signatures on administrative documents.
4. An instance is cited in Sermon 355, 5. Saint Ambrose taught the same in his *Commentary on Luke* 8, 77, where he based his view on the gospel (Matthew 15:3-6).
5. See Augustine, Sermon 179, 3.
6. Ambrose, *The Duties of Ministers* 2, 136ff. The needy to whom reference is made here must have been chiefly Italians forced to flee overseas by the invasions of the Goths. Saint Exuperius, Bishop of

Toulouse, did the same as Augustine when his city was besieged by the Vandals in 408 (Jerome, Letter 125, 20), as did Deogratias, Bishop of Carthage, in order to ransom prisoners of the Vandals and the Moors (Victor of Vita, *History of the Persecution of the Province of Africa* 1, 25). Two bishops of Arles, Saints Hilary (Honoratus?) (*Life of Hilary* 11) and Caesarius (*Life* 1, 32), likewise acted in the same way (though in this matter their biographers adopt a defensive and polemical tone); as, at an earlier date, did Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, who was rebuked for it by an adversary, Acacius of Caesarea (Sozomen, *History of the Church* 4, 25); similar accusations were leveled against Saint John Chrysostom at the Synod of Quercia in 403. On Saint Augustine's concern for the poor see Van der Meer, pages 137-140.

7. "Poor box" and "sacristy" seem to be the meanings of the two words *gazophylacium* and *secretarium*. See Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms* 63, 11.

## CHAPTER 25

### Paternal Authority The Law of Forgiveness

1 Augustine's clerics, like himself, were fed and clothed from the common funds; together they shared at all times a single house and a single table.<sup>1</sup>

2 Lest any take oaths too readily and perjure themselves,<sup>2</sup> he urged the people in his sermons in church<sup>3</sup> and also taught his followers not to swear, even at table. If anyone slipped and took an oath, he lost one of his allowed drinks<sup>4</sup> (the companions of Augustine's house and table were granted a set number of drinks).<sup>5</sup>

3 Actions contrary to discipline and departures from the rule of uprightness and honorableness Augustine rebuked or let pass as seemed appropriate or necessary. His primary emphasis in these matters was that no one should descend to lies in seeking to excuse his sins.<sup>6</sup>

4 In addition, anyone who, while offering his gift at the altar, remembered that a brother had something against him was to leave his gift at the altar, go to be reconciled with his brother, and then return to offer his gift at the altar (see Matthew 5:23-24). 5 If on the other hand he himself had something against his brother, he was to admonish him in private; if the other listened, he would have gained his brother; if the other refused to listen, he should take one or two others with him; if the other scorned even them, he should have recourse to the Church; and if the other refused to obey even the Church, then they should treat him as a pagan and a tax collector (Matthew 18:15-17). 6 Augustine added that if a brother sinned and asked forgiveness, his failure should be forgiven not seven times but seventy times

seven times (Matthew 18:21-22), just as each one daily asks the Lord for forgiveness (Matthew 6:12).

#### Notes

1. Augustine goes into greater detail in Sermon 355, 2.
2. See Matthew 5:34ff.; James 5:12. The same reason is given for this prohibition by Saint Augustine (Letter 157, 40) and Saint Ambrose: "Those who make a habit of swearing will inevitably perjure themselves on some occasion" (*Exhortation to Virgins* 74).
3. See an index to Augustine's works under the words *iuratio* and *iurare*. Augustine himself admits that he had had a struggle to rid himself of this habit (Sermons 180, 10; 307, 5), which we know from other sources was widespread at that time; see, for example, Palladius, *Lausiac History* 9; Salvian, *Divine Governance* 3, 31; 4, 68-77; *Statutes of the Early Church*, canon LXXV (61), where the reference is to clerics. One of the first admonitions in the *Rule for Virgins* of Saint Caesarius of Arles is that they are to avoid oaths "and curses as if these were the devil's poison."
4. The historian Harnack thought that this punishment was suggested by the statutes of some secular guild.
5. The same regulation is found in Saint Benedict, *Rule* 40.
6. See Psalm 140(141):4, which Augustine (and therefore Possidius) understood according to the Vulgate (the Hebrew text reads somewhat differently).

### Safeguards of Chastity

1 No woman ever frequented his house; no woman ever stayed there, not even his own sister, a widow consecrated to God who ruled the maidservants of the Lord until her death,<sup>1</sup> or his brother's daughters,<sup>2</sup> who were likewise consecrated to the service of God. This despite the fact that the councils of holy bishops had made exceptions for such persons as these. 2 It is true (he used to say) that no suspicion of evil can arise from having a sister or nieces staying in the house. On the other hand, these women must inevitably bring female friends to stay them, and still others would come from outside to visit them, and all this could be a stumbling block and a source of scandal for the weak (see 1 Corinthians 8:9; Romans 14:13). What is more, men who might be staying with the bishop or cleric in question might succumb to very human temptations due to the women living there or visiting (see 1 Corinthians 10:13), or might at least suffer harm to their reputations due to evil suspicions. 3 He therefore said that women should never be allowed to stay in the same house with the servants of God, however chaste the latter might be, lest, as I said, the example given be a source of scandal or a stumbling block to the weak. And if women asked to visit him or even simply to pay their respects, he never received them except in the presence of other clerics, nor did he ever speak with them alone, even if the matter required secrecy.<sup>3</sup>

#### Notes

1. We do not know the sister's name. Augustine mentions her in 423, after her death, when writing to some monks to rebuke them for their dissensions and to offer them a rule of life (Letter 211, 4).
2. The brother's name was Navigius (see above, Chapter 2, note 5).

3. Saint Jerome prescribed the same safeguards to Nepotian, a cleric (Letter 52, 5), as did Saint Ambrose to all ecclesiastics (*The Duties of Ministers* 1, 87). The Council of Hippo (393), canon 16, and the Third Council of Carthage (397) allowed clerics to have mother, sisters, aunts, nieces, and relatives in general living with them.

## CHAPTER 27, 1-5

## Charity and Prudence

## Humble and Serene Trust

1 In his own visits he followed the rule of the Apostle, namely, to visit only orphans and widows in need (James 1:27). 2 Or if the sick asked him to visit them, pray to the Lord for them, and lay his hand on them, he would go without delay. 3 He did not visit monasteries of women except in real need.

4 He asserted that in their lives and habits men of God should follow the rules which he himself had learned from the teaching of Ambrose of holy memory: never to seek a wife for someone or to write a recommendation for a man entering upon a military career<sup>1</sup> or to accept invitations to dinner in the locality.<sup>2</sup> 5 The reasons he gave for these rules were as follows: lest spouses quarrel and curse the one who had brought them together (but he also said that when spouses were in agreement, a priest should, if asked, intervene to ratify and bless covenants and consents already made<sup>3</sup>); and lest the man recommended for the military turn out badly and blame his backer; and lest the habit of temperance be lost through frequent attendance at banquets with fellow townsmen.

## Notes

1. Perhaps it would be preferable to take this as a reference to public office generally rather than to the military in particular, in keeping with a use of *militare* and *militia* that was common at this period. See, for example, Augustine, *Confessions* 6, 14f., where the reference is to *agentes in rebus*; Paulinus of Nola, Letter 8, 3, v. 12 (Letter 32 among the letters of Augustine), where he is speaking of Licentius, who was not a soldier.
2. This was the advice Saint Ambrose gave to ecclesiastics (*The Duties of Ministers* I, 86).
3. Saint Ambrose also urged this (Letter 19, 7).