

The Holy Spirit in salvation history: an Augustinian viewpoint

**El Espíritu Santo en la historia de la salvación:
un punto de vista agustiniano**

**Lo Spirito Santo nella storia della salvezza:
un punto di vista agostiniano**

*Allan D. Fitzgerald, O.S.A.**

Artículo de reflexión

Language was important to Augustine. As a rhetorician –or word-smith– he had an enviable reputation in the Roman Empire. His attention to the words of poets and philosophers, however, did not satisfy his longing. Only the words of Scripture were able to give him a way to find what he was seeking. Because of his conversion was ongoing, his appropriation of the words of Scripture still challenge thoughtful people.

Hence, not just any words mattered; they had to be appropriate – no less for him than for scholars and theologians today. Therefore, to use the words of systematic theology today to frame a study of Augustine is a way of asking him our questions before we have appreciated his questions. More precisely, to talk about Augustine’s pneumatology may ‘say something’ to contemporary theologians, but the mere use of the word ‘pneumatology’ adds a systematic quality to the discussion that distances us – both from Augustine and from his time. It may suggest that what matters is the system¹, but, more

* Institut Catholique (Paris, France): Doctorat en Sciences Théologiques avec spécialisation en liturgie et théologie sacramentaire. And Washington Theological Union: Certificate in Spiritual Direction from the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation and Washington Theological Union.

¹ “Je crois donc qu’il faut être convaincu qu’Augustin fut un «bon chrétien» dans sa doctrine comme dans sa vie, pour étudier ses œuvres sans présupposés, postulats et préjugés théologiques ou autres, pour lire ses œuvres simplement, comme elles doivent l’être, non seulement par les simples, mais aussi par les érudits”. (Madec, 1975, p. 77).

Recibido: 05-04-16 // Aprobado: 01-10-16

crucially, it hides an important methodological reality for the study of his thought on God as trinity: all of his writings matter, and not just those writings where he is thinking about Trinitarian relations.

The conviction that Augustine's conversion-experience is always in the background of his thought, this paper will describe what Augustine says about the Holy Spirit in some of the writings prior to and including the *Confessions*. It thus seeks to make sure that his experience of the Holy Spirit is not separated from his thought on the Holy Spirit. It seeks to maintain the tension between his spiritual experience of salvation in baptism and his words about the Holy Spirit.

Augustine's reflection on the Holy Spirit (like that of his contemporaries) is always trying to make sense of the words of Scripture. The philosophical currents of his time – as well as his rhetorical training – are, of course, part of the process. But it is a mistake to give more attention to the philosophical background than to the importance of the Scriptures for him. For the purposes of this paper, the bias toward the Word of God is just that: a primary emphasis.

The Holy Spirit, in fact, was not a discrete or separate topic for Augustine, but an integral part of a larger framework². Although it is right to think immediately of his thinking on the Holy Trinity, this paper will pay attention to another significant dimension of 4th and 5th century experience: salvation as it relates to that time, to that church and to the role of the Holy Spirit. Augustine's search was never limited to an effort to understand God; he was also seeking to be joined to God³. Hence, asking about the role of the Holy Spirit in salvation will provide one occasion for showing that Augustine's thought is not to be separated from his effort to explain creation rather than speculating on the interior life of God⁴.

² Since some attention has been centered on Trinitarian language in the earliest writings of Augustine, let me note that I will not enter into dialogue with Olivier du Roy's work on the Plotinian dimensions of Augustine's use of trinities in the early dialogues. See Lewis Ayres' discussion of Olivier du Roy's interpretations, "Giving Wings to Nicaea": Reconceiving Augustine's earliest Trinitarian Theology" in *Augustinian Studies* 38/1 (2007), 21-40.

³ "Sa pensée ne se meut pas sur le plan purement métaphysique; son intention n'est pas seulement de comprendre, mais de rejoindre Dieu». (Madec, 1963, p. 141).

⁴ Madec, "Note sur ..." p. 142; cf. *De Diversis Questionibus* 83, qu. 46).

In a 1974 Festschrift article, Josef Ratzinger raises a similar question as part of a discussion of books V and XV of the *de Trinitate*⁵. After speaking about Augustine's understanding of the Holy Spirit as love and as gift, he shows how these descriptions relate to salvation history, i.e., how the Holy Spirit is part of the discussion of salvation in Augustine's thought. The first sub-heading of the article frames its primary emphasis: "Becoming a Christian means becoming communion, thereby entering into the mode of being of the Holy Spirit". In other words, the Holy Spirit is seen from the point of view of the Christian community. What is the work of the Holy Spirit in the world?

A hidden dimension of this paper – something that begs for another more extensive and elaborate paper – is how to think about Augustine's thinking process. What does *exercitatio mentis* mean for him and why does he model that practice so frequently in works intended for others? Since he wants others to think along with him, to be exercised with him, something more than meets the eye is going on. His overriding purpose – salvation is not merely implicit and cannot be ignored.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN LETTER 11 – TO NEBRIDIUS

In a letter to Nebridius while still a layman, Augustine said that the action of the persons of the Trinity – even though the three persons do nothing apart from one another – "had to be shown to us distinctly because of our weakness"⁶. The role and function properly attributed to the Holy Spirit was then identified as "a certain interior and ineffable tenderness and sweetness of abiding in this knowledge [i.e., the knowledge of the Father given by the Son] and of scoring

⁵ Ratzinger (1974) "Der Heilige Geist als *communio*. Zum Verhältnis von Pneumatologie und Spiritualität bei Augustinus", in: C. Heitmann/H. Mühlen (Hgg.), *Erfahrung und Theologie des Heiligen Geistes*. Hamburg-München [English translation: "The Holy Spirit as *Communio*: Concerning the Relationship of Pneumatology and Spirituality in Augustine", *Communio* 25 (Summer 1998), 324-337]. L. Ayres' comments about it treat the metaphysical, intra-Trinitarian dimensions; he does not discuss the primary thrust of the article; see L. Ayres, "Sempiternus spiritus donum..." (note 4 above), 149-152.

⁶ *Letter 11*, 4: "tamen distincte demonstranda erant propter inbecillitatem nostrum".

all mortal things”⁷. In other words, the Holy Spirit provides ‘staying power’ so that what was learned in the rule of faith (*regula disciplinae*) might remain. That connection to the creedal background is an echo of his experience of baptism, through which a certain notion of the Holy Spirit was implanted: *in ista cognitione permanendi* or as favoring fidelity to his conversion to Christ. It is not just about knowledge, but about knowledge that saves/abides.

He closes that letter by telling Nebridius that he has the talent (*ingenio*) to pursue his questioning on his own, adding that piety is a crucial dimension of that search, i.e., piety is that “upon which one must above all take a stand” (*cui maxime standum est*)⁸. Thus did Augustine highlight the importance of keeping the talk about truth connected to doing the truth⁹. *Pietas* should keep faith-experience united to the search for understanding: *crede ut intellegas*¹⁰. Clearly, his experience as a faithful Christian led him to highlight the on-going challenge of living the Christian life. God’s Spirit helped him to “abide in this knowledge”.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN *DE FIDE ET SYMBOL*

In 393, Augustine was asked by Aurelius of Carthage to address a council of North African bishops gathered in Hippo; it was later published as *de fide et symbolo*. Addressing the article of the creed that proclaims belief in the Holy Spirit, he makes it clear that he has

⁷ Letter 11, 4: *quaedam interior et ineffabilis suavitas atque dulcedo in ista cognitione permanendi contemnendique omnia mortalia, quod donum et munus proprie spiritui sancto tribuitur.*

⁸ Letter 11, 4: You have my letter, not one that will end your concern about this question, but one that will perhaps begin to place your thoughts on a certain foundation in order that you may follow up the other points with your talent, which is well known to me, and may obtain them with the piety, upon which one must above all take a stand. [habes epistulam. non quae tuam curam de hac re finierit, sed quae cogitationes tuas certo fortasse aliquo fundamento inchoauerit, ut cetera ingenio, quod mihi notissimum est, persequareis et pietate, cui maxime standum est, consequaris.]

⁹ *On True Religion* 5, 8: “Our faith and teaching have demonstrated ... that there is not one thing called philosophy ... and another called religion...”

¹⁰ Cf. Holte (1962), *Béatitude et Sagesse. Saint Augustin et le problème de la fin de l’homme dans la philosophie ancienne*, Paris, Etudes Augustiniennes, 1962, section 4: *Studium sapientiae*.

been studying: in that section he refers to the “*docti*” (learned) and to the “*magni ... tractatores*” (well-know interpreters) of the Scriptures. His sources are not otherwise identified, but he notes their interest in naming the *proprium* (individuality) of the Holy Spirit¹¹. He identifies the *proprium* of the Holy Spirit saying:

Some have dared to believe that the Holy Spirit constitutes the very communion of the Father and the Son... This divinity, which they also want to interpret as the mutual love and charity toward each other, is called, they say, the Holy Spirit: many scriptural texts support their view, whether the following passage, *For the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us*, or numerous other similar passages. They also say this because we are reconciled to God through the Holy Spirit: hence, even when called the Gift of God, that title is enough to indicate that the love (*caritatem*) of God is the Holy Spirit. For it is only through love that we are reconciled to God and through it that we are called children of God¹².

His description of the Holy Spirit as the communion between the Father and the Son is foundational¹³, at least because – as Augustine says – through the Spirit, Christians have been called back to friendship

¹¹ *De fide et symbolo* 19: de spiritu autem sancto nondum tam copiose ac diligenter disputatum est a doctis et magnis diuinarum scripturarum tractatoribus, ut intellegi facile possit eius proprium, quo proprio fit, ut eum neque filium neque patrem dicere possimus, sed tantum spiritum sanctum, nisi quod eum donum dei esse praedicant, ut deum credamus non se ipso inferius donum dare. Knowing who these learned interpreters of the Scriptures were is less important than the indication of his wide-ranging reading.

¹² *De fide et symbolo* 19: ausi sunt tamen quidam ipsam communionem patris et filii ... spiritum sanctum credere... hanc ergo deitatem, quam etiam dilectionem in se inuicem amborum caritatemque uolunt intellegi, spiritum sanctum appellatum dicunt multisque scripturarum documentis adsunt huic opinioni suae: siue illo, quod dictum est: {quoniam caritas dei diffusa est in cordibus nostris per spiritum sanctum qui datus est nobis,} siue aliis multis talibus testimoniis, et eo ipso, quod per spiritum sanctum reconciliamur deo: unde etiam cum donum dei dicitur, satis significari uolunt caritatem dei esse spiritum sanctum. non enim reconciliamur illi nisi per dilectionem, qua etiam {filii dei} appellamur...

¹³ K. Ratzinger, *art. cit.*, p. 326: “When he is named by that which is the divinity of God, by what the Father and Son have in common, then his essence is just that, the *communio* of Father and Son”.

with God and to holiness¹⁴. But this focus on communion is about the church, not centered on the individual nor on knowledge *about* God. Augustine's interest was ecclesial, not speculative – as he says: “Those who hold this view [*that the Spirit is communion*] make great use of the following scriptural proof: *What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit* (Jn 3:6), for *God is spirit* (Jn 4:24). This refers to our birth not according to Adam in the flesh but according to Christ in the Holy Spirit”¹⁵. The reference to ‘birth’ sets baptism within a large context. Augustine will be even more explicit in the conclusion of his discussion of that article of the Creed: “Because we are commanded not only to love God ... but also our neighbor ... unless our faith has its roots within a community and a human society, where fraternal charity is at work, it will less fruitful” (*De fide et*

¹⁴ *De fide et symbolo* 19: Because we have been reconciled and recalled to friendship with God, we are, through charity, in a position to know all the hidden things of God, and so it is said of the Holy Spirit: *He will lead you into the whole truth* (Jn 16: 13). This was the reason that the confidence which filled the apostles at his coming and enabled them to preach the truth is, with justification, attributed to love, for the lack of confidence which accompanies fear is only cast out by the perfection of love. It is, therefore, called the gift of God, for a person does not enjoy what he knows unless he loves it. The enjoyment of God's wisdom means nothing other than to be united with him in love, and no one can remain firmly in what he apprehends except through love. The Spirit then is called holy, because to ensure permanence certain things are sanctioned or made holy, and there is no doubt that holiness is derived from sanction. Those who hold this view make great use of the following scriptural proof: *What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit* (Jn 3:6), for *God is spirit* (Jn 4:24). This refers to our birth not according to Adam in the flesh but according to Christ in the Holy Spirit.

et quia reconciliati et in amicitiam reuocati per caritatem poterimus omnia dei secreta cognoscere, propterea de spiritu sancto dicitur: {ipse uos inducet in omnem ueritatem;} propterea et confidentia praedicandae ueritatis, qua inpleti sunt in aduentu eius apostoli, recte caritati tribuitur, quia et diffidentia timori datur, quem consummatio caritatis excludit. et ideo {donum dei} dicitur, quia eo quod quisque nouit non fruitur, nisi id diligat. frui autem sapientia dei nihil est aliud quam ei dilectione cohaerere, neque quisquam in eo quod percipit permanet nisi dilectione; et ideo spiritus sanctus dicitur, quoniam ad permanendum sancuntur quaecumque sancuntur nec dubium est a sanciendo sanctitatem uocari. maxime autem illo testimonio utuntur assertores huius sententiae, quod scriptum est: {quod natum est de carne, caro est; et quod natum est de spiritu, spiritus est,} quoniam {deus spiritus est.} hic enim regenerationem nostram dicit, quae non secundum Adam de carne est, sed secundum Christum de spiritu sancto.

¹⁵ *De fide et symbolo* 19: maxime autem illo testimonio utuntur assertores huius sententiae, quod scriptum est: {quod natum est de carne, caro est; et quod natum est de spiritu, spiritus est,} quoniam {deus spiritus est.} hic enim regenerationem nostram dicit, quae non secundum Adam de carne est, sed secundum Christum de spiritu sancto.

symbol 21)¹⁶. His concern is pastoral rather than metaphysical. Being “spirit-ual,” therefore, always has something to do with bringing together, unifying, and communicating (cf. Ratzinger, p. 327). The relation of persons within the community is thus crucial.

It should be noted that Augustine was developing this understanding of the Holy Spirit at a time when the Donatists were a dominant presence in his world (Fitzgerald, 2009). The challenge of the bishops gathered at Hippo in 393 was to find a way to strengthen the Catholic Church in the face of a Donatist majority. For him to affirm the need for fraternal charity was not surprising. But it was more than a theory and more than mere practicality. He also saw the need to teach the Christians in Hippo that their activity was based on an understanding of God, the Holy Spirit, and of Church and baptism.

Hence, the reference to being born in Christ in the Holy Spirit not only reaffirms a general baptismal commitment, but it also suggests that Augustine was responding to a Donatist understanding of the Holy Spirit (as limited by the minister’s holiness) and that he was using his experience of baptism to formulate and frame his thinking. The moral encouragement he was giving to the gathered bishops, therefore, had to have doctrinal content. He gave them a healthy, sweeping view of the meaning of human existence and of the role of the Holy Spirit as given in baptism. Such an overview of the connection of his words to a Donatist view of the Holy Spirit becomes clearer in book XIII of the *Confessions*¹⁷.

THE HOLY SPIRIT IN *CONFESSIONS* XIII

It has often been asked how the thirteen books of the *Confessions* can be considered a single book, i.e., how the commentary on Genesis in the last three books can be considered part of Augustine’s *confessio*. A refined analysis of that connection and of the unity of the

¹⁶ *De fide et symbolo 21*: sed quoniam dilectio non tantum in deum nobis imperata est ... sed etiam in proximum ... nisi autem ista fides congregationem societatemque hominum teneat, in qua fraterna caritas operetur, minus fructuosa est ...

¹⁷ Even though the use of her insights is set within a very different context, the following pages owe much to the work of Isabelle Bochet. See the next note.

Confessions as a whole can be found in the work of Isabelle Bochet. (Bochet, 2004). Book XIII sheds some clear light on the unity of the *Confessions* because, as Fulbert Cayré wrote: “Le livre XIII constitue une synthèse remarquable sur le rôle du Saint Esprit dans l’âme du baptisé”. (Cayré, 1956, p. 147). How does a focus on baptism in book XIII shed new light on the role of the Holy Spirit? H. Chadwick explained the minimal reference to baptism in book IX as a way to give the Donatists no occasion for criticism.

Isabelle Bochet shows how book xiii makes up for any lack by what is said in book xiii.

By leaving out any mention of the minister, the water, and the ritual in the first case, Augustine was able to shift the emphasis to the *virtus* or to the effect of baptism in the other. The Donatist requirement that the water had to be administered by a holy minister was not worth discussing – but, by connecting water and the Holy Spirit Augustine provides a true non-Donatist reading of the views of Tertullian and Cyprian. Chadwick provides a succinct summary of the historical circumstances:

“In the *Confessions* the means of Augustine’s baptism is not a secondary matter ... As bishop of a minority Catholic community in the city of Hippo Regius, faced by a large Donatist majority during the 390s, every day of Augustine’s life will have been dominated by the consequences of the schism. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that the thunderous and total silence of the *Confessions* about the existence of a potent Donatist opposition is not an accident. The presence of the schismatics and of their sacramental theology is written large in the oblique way in which Augustine there treats the critical issues of the sacramental act, its ministers, and his own inner conversion of heart and will. The Donatists who dredged up the mud of his youthful indiscretions were answered twice over: *Et baptizati sumus et fugit a nobis sollicitudo uitae praeteritae*”¹⁸.

¹⁸ Henry Chadwick, “Donatism and the Confessions of Augustine,” *Philanthropia kai Eusebeia. Festschrift für Albrecht Dihle zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. G.W. Most, H. Petersmann, A.M. Ritter, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993, 23-35, p. 35.

In other words, what Augustine said in book IX avoided any polemics by stating simply that baptism brought about a fundamental change within. In book XIII, by citing Scriptural passages that were normally used in the Easter liturgy, he shows how the action of the Spirit in creation is also present in regeneration. He was not interested in defending *his* baptism but in developing a proper understanding of the “progressive transformation begun in baptism”¹⁹. Hence, “the external act of baptism is worthless if it is not accompanied by a transformation of the heart by charity, that is, by the Holy Spirit”²⁰. In his view, the grace of baptism is the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit: “In the morning I will stand and see my God, who sheds the light of salvation on my face, who will breathe life even into our mortal bodies through the Spirit who dwells in us and has been mercifully hovering over the dark chaos of our inner being (*Conf.* 14, 15)”.

Thus is baptism like the action of the Spirit who was “poised over the waters at the beginning” (*Conf.* XIII, 7, 8) and the Holy Spirit is now “hovering over ... our inner being”. That parallel between the action of the Holy Spirit in creation and in baptism is a consistent theme²¹: “Our true place is where we find rest. We are borne toward it by love, and it is your good Spirit who lifts up our sunken nature from the gates of death”²².

The Donatists said that the water of Catholic baptism lacked the presence of the Holy Spirit because the minister was not holy; they “argued that the material element of water and the form of the invocation of the name of the Trinity become irrelevant to the recipient at baptism if not used and employed by a ritually pure minister of the sacrament”. (Mbanisi, 2008, p. 165) That helps to explain

¹⁹ I. Bochet, *op. cit.*, p. 231, “la transformation progressive inaugurée par le baptême.

²⁰ I. Bochet, *op. cit.*, p. 236: “l’acte extérieur du baptême ne sert de rien, s’il ne s’accompagne de la transformation du cœur par la charité, c’est-à-dire par l’Esprit Saint”.

²¹ F. Cayré, art. cit., p. 143: ... le livre XIII des *Confessions* est comme une longue description, enthousiaste, souvent lyrique, des interventions de l’Esprit de Dieu dans la vie chrétienne ...

²² *Conf.* XIII, 9, 10.

Augustine's insistence on the presence of the Holy Spirit in the waters of baptism²³.

CONCLUSION

In book XIII of the *Confessions*, A's focus is pastoral rather than speculative. His speculation is a kind of *exercitatio mentis* that seeks to bring his readers with him as he explores the role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life – reaching toward eternal rest and salvation. His concern with salvation is framed in terms which resonate with his own baptism where the gift was the Holy Spirit ... as in *de trinitate*. The focus on the Spirit as gift highlights the meaning of baptism as abiding in love, not on purity of water or on the holiness of the minister. Baptism is thus seen as an experience of church, not limited to this person or this baptism. That may be what is most significant in his view that baptism is the sacrament of the Holy Spirit.

REFERENCIAS

- Bochet, I. (2004). *Le Firmament de L'Écriture: L'Herméneutique Augustinienne*. Paris: Institut des Études Augustiniennes.
- Cayré, F. (1956). "Le livre XIII des Confessions". *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* (2) 143-161.
- Fitzgerald. (2009). *When Augustine was a priest: pride, common good and Donatism*. *Augustinian Studies*.
- Holte. (1962). *Béatitude et Sagesse. Saint Augustin et le problème de la fin de l'homme dans la philosophie ancienne*, Paris, *Etudes Augustiniennes*. Paris: *Etudes Augustiniennes*.

²³ Bright, P. "En-Spirited Waters: Baptism in the Confessions of Augustine", *The Early Church in its Context. Essays in Honor of E. Ferguson*, ed. A.J. Malherbe, F. W. Norris, J.W. Thompson, Leiden, Brill, 1998, 48-58, p. 52: "At the forefront of the theological debate was the question of the presence of the Spirit in the waters of baptism... what the *Confessions* gains from the bitter debate is a sharpened theological awareness of the regeneration in the Spirit in the life-giving waters of baptism".

Madec, G. (1963). Note sur la Vision Augustinienne du Monde. *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes*, (9) 139 - 141 .

Madec, M. (1975). Christus, scientia et sapientia nostra. Le principe de coherence de la doctrine augustinienne. *Recherches Augustiniennes*, (10) 77-85.

Mbanisi, V. (2008). Baptism and the ideal of unity and universality of the Church in St. Augustine's ecclesiology: An exposition of his theology of baptism in light of Donatist controversy. ETD Collection for Fordham University.

Ratzinger, J. (1974). *Der Heilige Geist als communio. Zum Verhältnis von Pneumatologie und Spiritualität bei Augustinus*. Hamburg.