

Saint Augustine. A Man inhabited by the Mystery of the Church

San Agustín. Un hombre habitado por el misterio de la Iglesia

Sant'Agostino. Un uomo abitato dal mistero della chiesa

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Artículo de Investigación

ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the ecclesiology of Saint Augustine from an autobiographical point of view. It takes into consideration the various stages in which his understanding of the Church unfolded. As a child, he clung to Mother Church at a time of a mortal peril through the devotion of his mother, Monica. Having overcome the turmoil of his reckless adolescence and the period of his wandering in the sects, and thanks to the providential turn of his professional experience, he rediscovered the Church at Milan through the ministry of Bishop Ambrose. After his conversion, he gave up the ideals of a quiet, contemplative life he had in view, to make himself the servant of the Church he wholeheartedly loved. But he lived this reality in the tension between silence and service. And that should be the ideal of those who have him as their Spiritual Father and all who are involved in pastoral ministry.

Keywords:

Saint Augustine, conversion, service, Saint Monica, Church.

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RESUMEN:

Este trabajo examina la eclesiología de San Agustín desde un punto de vista autobiográfico. Toma en consideración las diversas etapas en las que su comprensión de la Iglesia se desarrolló. De niño, se aferró a la Madre Iglesia en un momento de peligro mortal a través de la devoción de su madre, Mónica. Habiendo superado la agitación de su adolescencia temeraria y el período de su vagar en las sectas, y gracias al giro providencial de su experiencia profesional, redescubrió la Iglesia en Milán a través del ministerio del obispo Ambrose. Después de su conversión, abandonó los ideales de una vida tranquila y contemplativa que tenía a la vista, para convertirse en el servidor de la Iglesia que amaba de todo corazón. Pero vivió esta realidad en la tensión entre el silencio y el servicio. Y ese debería ser el ideal de aquellos que lo tienen como su Padre espiritual y todos los que están involucrados en el ministerio pastoral.

Palabras clave:

san Agustín, conversión, servicio, santa Mónica, Iglesia.

RIASSUNTO:

Questo lavoro esamina l'eclesiologia di Sant'Agostino da un punto di vista autobiografico. Prende in considerazione le diverse tappe in cui la sua comprensione della chiesa è stata sviluppata. Da bambino, si è afferrato alla Madre Chiesa in un momento di pericolo mortale, attraverso la devozione di sua madre, Monica. Avendo superato l'agitazione della sua adolescenza temeraria e il periodo del suo vagare nelle sette e grazie al giro providenziale della sua esperienza professionale, ha riscoperto la chiesa a Milano verso il ministero del vescovo Ambrosio. Dopo la sua conversione, ha abbandonato gli ideali di vivere una vita tranquilla e contemplativa che aveva alla vista, per diventare il servitore della chiesa che amava con tutto il cuore. Ma ha vissuto questa realtà nella tensione tra il silenzio e il servizio e quello dovrebbe essere l'ideale di quelli che lo tengono come loro Padre spirituale e di tutti quelli che sono stati coinvolti nel ministero pastorale.

Parole chiavi:

Sant'Agostino, conversione, servizio, Santa Monica e chiesa.

INTRODUCTION

Even though not all of my readers might have studied Newton's physics, I dare to think that all of us have an idea about the law of universal gravitation, which explains the fall of bodies¹. For the simple fact of having, at least, seen a glass or a fork falling from a table, we have got an idea about it. Saint Augustine also knew this law, even if he did not present it like the scholars of the 16th century. One day, in a sermon, he expressed this idea to the faithful in Hippo, and announced a notable exception to it:

There are two kinds of weights. Weight is like a force within each thing that seems to make it strain toward its proper place. This is what I mean by "weight." You are carrying a stone in your hand. You feel its weight; it presses on your hand because it is seeking its appropriate place. Do you want to see what it is looking for? Take your hand away;

¹ Gravitation is a phenomenon of physical interaction causing the attraction of solid bodies on one another, under the effect of their weight. Newton's law of universal gravitation states that a particle attracts every other particle in the universe using a force that is directly proportional to the product of their masses and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them. By this theory, it was shown separately that large, spherically symmetrical masses attract and are attracted as if all their mass were concentrated at their centres. This is quite technical for the theological write-up. Let's give Augustine the floor for him to teach is his perspective of gravitation. Before that let's spend a few words on Isaac Newton (1642-1726). He was an English mathematician, astronomer, and physicist (described in his day as a "natural philosopher") who is widely recognized as one of the most influential scientists of all time and a key figure in the scientific revolution. His book *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy), first published in 1687, laid the foundations of classical mechanics. Newton also made seminal contributions to optics, and he shares credit with Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz for developing the infinitesimal calculus. Cf. J. M. Keynes, *Newton, the Man*, The Royal Society, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, vol. Newton Tercentenary Celebrations, 1947, pp. 27-34; A. Koyré (trasl. R. Tarr), *Du monde clos à l'univers infini* [From The Closed World to the Infinite Universe], Paris, Gallimard, coll. «Tel» 2003; R. Westfall (trasl. M.-A. Lescouret), *Newton [Never at Rest. A Biography of Isaac Newton]*, Flammarion, coll. Figures de la science, Paris 1994.

it plummets to the earth, it comes to rest on the ground. It has reached the goal it was tending toward; it has found the place proper to it. In that case, “weight” was something like a spontaneous movement, without life, without sensation... For things that strain in a downward direction, the foundation is placed at the bottom. But God’s Church, though established here below, strains toward heaven, and so our foundation is laid there, where our Lord Jesus Christ sits at the Father’s right hand. (Aug., en Ps. 29 [2], 10 [CCL 38,181-182])²

For Saint Augustine, the Mystery of the Church can be understood in a fruitful dialogue between “remaining below” (on earth) and “straining upward” (toward heaven), in a kind of law opposite to that of gravitation. This dialogue, preached by the Bishop of Hippo during his many years of ministry, was first interiorized by him and lived out in his daily life. There was no demarcation line for him between living and doing theology since his whole being given to God, was spent in a kind of constant yearning to rest in Him (*conf.* I, 1, 1). Likewise, this had significant consequences on his reflections about the Church, which was for him an object of a living experience. In fact, from his childhood up to episcopal consecration, Augustine had never been indeed so far the mystery of the Church even in the darkest moments of his search for truth. And this could be explained by the fact that he has been marked by the sign of Christ, the sign of the Church from his tender infancy.

To understand Augustinian theology in general, one must first consider the autobiographical elements of his writings that enlighten us on the circumstances that determined his doctrinal reflections and his literary production. His understanding of the mystery of the

² “*Pondera gemina sunt. Pondus enim est impetus quidam cuiusque rei, uelut conantis ad locum suum; hoc est pondus. Fers lapidem manu, pateris pondus; premit manum tuam, quia locum suum quaerit. Et uis uidere quid quaerat? Subtrahe manum, uenit ad terram, quiescit in terra; peruenit quo tendebat, inuenit locum suum. Pondus ergo illud motus erat quasi spontaneus, sine anima, sine sensu... Rebus ergo ad ima tendentibus in imo ponitur fundamentum; Ecclesia uero Dei in imo posita tendit in caelum. Fundamentum ergo nostrum ibi positum est, dominus noster Iesus Christus sedens ad dexteram Patris*”.

Church depends on his personal experience and his itinerary toward the discovery of the ecclesial reality. That is why to speak about Saint Augustine as a man inhabited by the mystery of the Church; we shall begin with his life, that is, we shall scrutinize his ecclesiology from an autobiographical point of view.³ What did he say his experience was and what do we know from other sources about this aspect of his life and ministry? Of course, in his bitter controversies against the heretics and schismatics of his time, one of Augustine's priorities was to defend the Catholic Church. We could find there, valuable resources from his polemical writings, but we shall not consider those aspects of his ecclesiology in this paper. We shall rather limit ourselves to the following points:

- 1) The motherhood of the Church and the motherhood of the Church in Augustine's thought.
- 2) The influence of Saint Ambrose and the Church of Milan in his conversion.
- 3) Augustine's meeting with a Church in need of pastors.
- 4) Augustine, the Pastor between *silence* and *service*.

Our major sources in this itinerary shall be the autobiographical works of Augustine, namely his *Confessions* (*conf.*), some of his *Letters* (*ep.*), *Sermons* (*s.*) *Expositions of the Psalms* (*en. Ps.*) and in other important writings. The only secondary source we are taking into consideration in this paper is his life (*Vita Augustini*) written by Possidius his friend and first biographer. The English translations quoted here are generally from *The Works of Saint Augustine* (1990). The Latin original texts quoted in footnotes are from the available critical editions of the *Corpus Christianorum Latinorum* (CCL) or from the *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (CSEL). Where there is not a critical edition, we refer to *Patrologia Latina* (PL).

³ This aspect of Augustinian ecclesiology has been well developed by Agostino Clerici, *Sant'Agostino. La chiesa: da Eva alla città di Dio*, Città Nuova, Roma 2000, 5-16. It is in an anthology of texts from Saint Augustine on the Church.

MONICA'S MOTHERHOOD AND THE MOTHERHOOD OF THE CHURCH

There is a text in the first book of the *Confessions*, in which the Church and Monica are presented together. Augustine remembers an event of his childhood: a bowel obstruction threatening to claim his life at an early age, forces him to ask for Baptism because he is afraid to die without this Sacrament. In fact, in the ancient Church, it was the custom to delay Baptism until adulthood, so that the Sacrament would delete all the sins of adolescence and youth. Because of the state of his health, the little Augustine asked himself for the Sacrament. From whom did Augustine request this Sacrament? Here is one of the most expressive and profoundly personal texts we find in his writings on that question:

You saw, Lord, how one day in my boyhood I was suddenly seized by stomach pains and, as my fever mounted, came near to death. You saw, my God, because even then you were guarding me, with what distress and what faith I earnestly begged to be baptized into your Christ, who is my God and my Lord; you saw how I pleaded with my loving, kindly mother and with the mother of us all, your Church.⁴

Augustine places his mother Monica close to the Church he describes as “the mother of us all.” The devotion of his mother, his mother according to the flesh (*mater carnis*) Monica, left an indelible and existential influence on the way Augustine, as the Bishop of Hippo, perceived the Catholic Church, in whose womb he was generated into the life of God.

The image of the maternal womb and childbirth is characteristic of Augustine's link between his mother Monica and the Church. He feels he was given birth to twice by Monica and admits that the spiritual birth pangs must have been more difficult than the ones of the flesh. He asserts “I can find no words to express how intensely

⁴ Aug., *conf.* I, 11, 17 (CCL 27, 9-10): “Uidisti, Domine, cum adhuc puer essem et quodam die pressu stomachi repente aestuarem paene moriturus, uidisti, Deus meus, quoniam custos meus iam eras, quo motu animi et qua fide baptismum Christi tui, Dei et Domini mei, flagitavi a pietate matris meae et matris omnium nostrum, ecclesiae tuae”.

she loved me: with far more anxious solicitude did she give birth to me in the spirit than ever she had in the flesh.”⁵ Moreover, in Augustine’s doctrine, the image of the Church as a mother generating and giving birth to her sons and daughters is constant. He used to say to the catechumens that they begin to have God as their Father, from the moment in which they are born of the mother who is the Church. The holy Bishop has many admonitions in which he insists on the maternity of the Church. In this second Exposition on Psalm 88, he says:

Let us love the Lord our God, and let us love his Church: him as our Father, her as our Mother; him as Lord and her as his handmaiden, for we are his hand-maiden’s children... Then how does it benefit you to avoid offending your Father, when he is bound to punish the insult you are offering to your Mother? What is the use of confessing the Lord, honoring him, preaching him, acknowledging his Son and confessing that the Son is at the Father’s right hand if you blaspheme against his Church?⁶

In this sense, he could also ascertain: “He has no love for God, he who does not love the unity of the Church.”⁷ He reminds the *Competentes* at the moment when they receive their Symbol (their Profession of Faith), “See your mother’s womb, the holy Church, see how she works and moans to give you birth, to produce in you the light of faith.”⁸ This theme of spiritual regeneration is very well

⁵ *Ibid.*, V, 9, 16 (CCL 27,66): “*Non enim satis eloquor, quid erga me habebat animi et quanto maiore sollicitudine me parturiebat spiritu, quam carne pepererat.*”

⁶ *Id.*, en. Ps. 88 (2), 14 (CCL 39, 1244): “*Amemus Dominum deum nostrum, amemus ecclesiam eius: illum sicut patrem, istam sicut matrem; illum sicut Dominum, hanc sicut ancillam eius, quia filii ancillae ipsius sumus... quid tibi prodest non offensus pater, qui offensam undicat matrem? quid prodest si Dominum confiteris, deum honoras, ipsum praedicas, filium eius agnoscis, sedentem ad patris dexteram confiteris, et blasphemias ecclesiam eius?*”

⁷ *Id.*, *bapt.* 3, 16, 21 (CSEL 51,212): “*Non autem habet Dei caritatem, qui Ecclesiae non diligit unitatem.*”

⁸ During Saint Augustine’s time, Catechumens, that is those who prepared themselves for receiving Baptism, were divided into several classes. One of these classes concerned those called *Competentes*, which means in Latin “those who ask together,” or better,

exemplified in part of a commentary on the Gospel according to Saint John. Augustine wrote:

There is only one spiritual rebirth, just as there is only one birth in the flesh. In fact, it is impossible for anyone, whether he has just emerged from the womb or has reached a ripe old age, to go back inside his mother's womb and be born. But just as a woman's womb is only intended to give birth once by physical birth, so too the Church's womb is intended to baptize once by spiritual birth.⁹

In her task as a mother, the Church is naturally compared to Mary, Virgin, and Mother, who gave birth to the Lord and retains her virginity:

So the Church is a virgin; let her be a virgin; let her beware of being seduced, or she will find herself corrupted. The Church is a virgin. You're going to say to me, perhaps, "If she is a virgin, how does she give birth to children? Or if she doesn't bear children, how is it we gave in our names to be born of her womb?" I answer: she is both virgin, and she gives birth. She imitates Mary, who gave birth to the

the Postulants. These Postulants asked to receive Baptism soon, and their religious instruction seemed to be sufficient. Saint Augustine addresses the latter when he is still at the beginning of his priestly ministry. On process of Christian Initiation in the Ancient Church there is huge bibliography of which we are just indicating the most prominent of recent studies: M. Dujarier, *Breve storia del catecumenato*, Leumann (To) 1984 (Fr. orig. 1980); G. Groppo, *Patristica (catechesi)*, in J. Gevaert (ed.), *Diz. di catechetica*, Leumann (To) 1983, 482-485; M. Naldini, *Catechesi patristica nel IV secolo*, in CCC 6 (1985) 57-76; V. Saxer, *Les rites de l'initiation chrétienne du IIe au VIe siècle*, Spoleto 1988; A. Olivar, *La predicación cristiana antigua*, Barcelona 1991; Ch. Jacob, *Zur Krise der Mystagogie in der alten Kirche*, in *Theologie und Philosophie* 66 (1991) 75-89; M. Dujarier, *Devenir disciple du Christ. Cathécuménat et "discipulat"*, in *Historiam Perscrutari, Misc. O. Pasquato*, Rome 2002, 521-537; J.-P. Bouhot, *La tradition catéchétique et exégétique du 'Pater noster'*, in *REAug* 33 (2003) 3-18.

⁹ Aug., *Io. eu. tr.* 12, 2 (CCL 36, 120): "*Regeneratio spiritalis una est, sicut generatio carnalis una est ... Omnino enim non potest, siue recens ab utero, siue annosa iam aetate, redire rursum in materna uiscera, et nasci. sed sicut ad natiuitatem carnalem ualent muliebricia uiscera ad semel pariendum, sic ad natiuitatem spiritalem ualent uiscera ecclesiae, ut semel quisque baptizetur*".

Lord. Didn't the Virgin, Saint Mary, both give birth and remain a virgin? So too the Church both gives birth and is a virgin.¹⁰

When we consider Augustine's parallelism between his mother Monica and the Church, it is good to bear in mind the pages in which the Bishop of Hippo gives Mother Church a higher position above all human motherhood. For example, a young man of Hippo called Loetus decided to embrace a life of holiness; he left his hometown with a very firm decision and Christian enthusiasm to consecrate himself to God. But his pious desire was soon disturbed by the affection of his family members, and most especially that of his mother. Saint Augustine wrote to exhort, to courage and show him the right course of action a Christian should take towards a mother who tries to stop him from embarking on his journey towards spiritual fulfillment. Above all, he wanted to remind him of the hierarchy of values and loves (*ordo amoris*). He said to him:

Mother Church is also the mother of your mother. She has conceived both of you from Christ; she has been in travail for you with the blood of martyrs; she has given birth to you into everlasting light; she has fed and feeds you with the milk of faith, and, though she prepares more solid foods, she sees with horror that you want to wail like small children without teeth.¹¹

These considerations exposed by Saint Augustine speak even today to many youth and parents who do not give the right priority

¹⁰ Id., s. 213, 8 (MA 1, 447-448): "*Virgo est ergo Ecclesia. Virgo est, virgo sit: caveat seductorem, ne inveniat corruptorem. Virgo est Ecclesia. Dictums es mihi forte: Si virgo est, quomodo parit filios? Aut si non parit filios, quomodo dedimus nomina nostra, ut de eius visceribus nasceremur? Respondeo: Et virgo est, et parit; Mariam imitatur, quae Dominum peperit. Numquid non Virgo Sancta Maria et peperit, et virgo permansit? Sic et Ecclesia et parit, et virgo est; et si consideres, Christum parit: quia membra eius sunt, qui baptizantur.*"

¹¹ Aug., ep. 246, 3 (CSEL 57, 574-575): "*Mater ecclesia mater est etiam matris tuae. haec uos de Christo concepit, haec martyrum sanguine parturiuit, haec in sempiternam lucem peperit, haec fidei lacte nutriuit et nutrit cibosque maiores praeparans, quod adhuc paruuli et sine dentibus uagire uultis, horrescit.*"

to things the way they should be. Many, indeed forget the limits and scope of earthly affections in front of the love that will last forever for those who use discernment and wisdom in human relationships, be they family bonds.

SAINT AMBROSE AND THE CHURCH OF MILAN

So I came to Milan and to Bishop Ambrose, who was known throughout the world as one of the best of men. He was a devout worshiper of you, Lord, and at that time his energetic preaching provided your people with choicest wheat and the joy of oil and the sober intoxication of wine. Unknowingly I was led by you to him, so that through him I might be led, knowingly, to you. This man of God welcomed me with fatherly kindness and showed the charitable concern for my pilgrimage that befitted a bishop. I began to feel affection for him, not at first as a teacher of truth, for that I had given up hope of finding in your Church, but simply as a man who was kind to me¹².

This is Augustine's story of his meeting with Bishop Ambrose in his *Confessions*. Augustine, a brilliant professor of rhetoric, was sent to Milan in autumn 384 by Symmachus, the then prefect of Rome. He arrived as a renowned master in the art of discourse and had the duty of pronouncing official speeches at the imperial court, to praise the Emperor and the noblemen of his court. He obtained this responsibility with the help of some ex-friends with whom was a member of the Manichaean sect. However, Symmachus' secret intention for sending Augustine to the city of the Imperial Court was not only to provide an excellent speaker to the Court but most importantly to feature an open anti-Catholic intellectual capable of

¹² Id., *conf.*, V, 13, 23 (CCL 27,70): "*Et ueni Mediolanium ad Ambrosium episcopum, in optimis notum orbi terrae, pium cultorem tuum, cuius tunc eloquia strenue ministrabant adipem frumenti tui et laetitiam olei et sobriam uini ebrietatem populo tuo. ad eum autem ducebar abs te nesciens, ut per eum ad te sciens ducerer. suscepit me paterne ille homo dei et peregrinationem meam satis episcopaliter dilexit. et eum amare coepi primo quidem non tamquam doctorem ueri, quod in ecclesia tua prorsus desperabam, sed tamquam hominem benignum in me.*"

challenging the famous Bishop of that city and the Church under his responsibility. When Augustine eventually visited Ambrose, the latter welcomed him with the kindness of a father. According to personal plans, Augustine was meant to create all sorts of difficulties for the Church in Milan. But this Church, through the ministry of Ambrose as its pastor, accompanied the young Augustine from the position of a fiery opponent of the Church to that of a masterpiece of grace within the same Church.¹³

The friendship between Augustine and Ambrose was almost insignificant on the level of interpersonal relations, even if it has been the object of considerable speculation in many books and articles. One may ask what the real depth of this friendship between the Bishop of Milan and the young rhetorician of the Imperial Court was. Ambrose was not Augustine's friend in the sense of passionate spiritual direction. Augustine liked him as the Bishop of a Church that was alive and courageous. It was there that Augustine experienced, perhaps for the first time as an adult, the reality of a Church that utterly invalidated a thousand forms of prejudice he had in the Catholic Church, due to the Manichaeans' anti-Catholic propaganda. The love of a Bishop always reveals the love of the Church he heads in its various components and richness. It is the love of a full Church,¹⁴ according to the presentation Augustine made himself on the Church in Milan. It was a real Church made up of faithful gathered around their Pastor, and not a sect or a secret society, or a den of adepts of heretical movements. This Church succeeded in defending itself against the attacks on its unity, as was the case during the Holy Week in 386. The words of Ambrose nicely depict the picture of the Church in Milan:

“Beautified by the blood of many martyrs, and still more importantly, enriched by the blood of Christ, she displays the bright splendour of faith and is a witness; at the same

¹³ Cf. A. Clerici, *Sant'Agostino. La Chiesa, da Eva alla città di Dio*, 11.

¹⁴ Aug., *conf.*, IX, 7, 15 (CCL 27,141): “*Non longe coeperat Mediolanensis Ecclesia genus hoc consolationis et exhortationis celebrare magno studio fratrum concinentium vocibus et cordibus.*”

time like the pomegranate she keeps in her womb under a single coverage, much fruit, and embraces many activities due to her virtue”.¹⁵

The meeting with Ambrose and his Church was very crucial for Augustine. It humbled his presumptions of deriving his knowledge from an abstract religion, founded on reason (Manichaeism). Augustine saw that the purpose of the faith he drank with his mother's milk was mysteriously hidden in his experience of the Church, and not so much in an intellectual discovery about which the Manichaeans were conceitedly bragging. This is all the more true from the fact that the most significant act of this new step in Augustine's life was an ecclesial sign, conferred by the same Bishop Ambrose during the most important liturgical celebration of the year: His Baptism about which he spoke in the most laconic way in his *Confessions*: “And we were baptized, and worries about our past life vanished.”¹⁶

At that point, Augustine had become a Christian to all effects and purposes. But in spite of the decisive step he had just made, there was still another “conversion” to be made by this neophyte. If in Milan he was baptized in 387 according to the faith of his mother Monica, it was only at Hippo in 391 that he became a total gift to the Catholic Church. We shall now examine, in this autobiographical approach to his ecclesiology, another aspect of Augustine definite conversion which made him available for the service of the Church.

MEETING WITH AN AFRICAN CHURCH IN NEED OF A PASTOR

When Augustine returned to Africa after his Baptism, he moved towards his first monastic experience in Thagaste, his native village. There, he spent three important years during which he refined his

¹⁵ Ambr., *Hexameron* III, 13, 56 (CSEL, 32,1, 98). “*Ecclesia enim bonum fidei fulgorem confessionis que praetendit tot martyrum sanguine speciosa et quod est amplius Christi cruore dotata, simul plurimos intra se fructus usu istius pomi sub una munitione conseruans et uirtutum multa negotia complectens; sapiens enim spiritu celat negotia.*”

¹⁶ Aug., *conf.* IX, 6, 14 (CCL 27,141): “*Et baptizati sumus et fugit a nobis sollicitudo vitae praeteritae.*”

inner life and his vocation in an ideal pattern of study and work. In 391, probably during January, he went to Hippo to meet a friend he wanted to gain to the monastic life he was organizing, and thus widen up his new experience. Augustine was then taken *incognito* and ordained a priest by Bishop Valerius of Hippo, who needed a minister for proclaiming the Work of God. Augustine asked his Bishop to allow him to prepare himself for this new task through a thorough study of Holy Scripture. Shortly after, he became the successor of Valerius and continued his religious experience in the monastery of clerics in Hippo, from 395/6 until his death in 430.

As we have seen through this itinerary, the conversion that started in the garden of Milan led him to the discovery of all its requirements and consequences as the years went by. It revealed a change in the Christian vocation of Saint Augustine. The year 391 was the beginning of an entirely new situation in his life, especially as regards his Christian experience in the Church. From his profound aspiration for a quiet, meditative and prayerful life in a monastery, he ended up as a servant for a Church in need of a pastor. In a nutshell, what we should retain from the preceding is that there was for Augustine a “*conversion to the Church.*” However, this does not mean that priestly and episcopal ordinations determine the authenticity of Augustine’s conversion to the Christian faith, nor can we say that his awareness of the community dimension of Christian life is what proves genuineness of his conversion, because he already knew this and was living it deeply as of the time he returned to Africa. The fundamental point is that from his ordination on, he perceived the Church in her pragmatic and more realistic dimension, and less in a mystical one. For him, the Church was no longer a circle of friends sharing their monastic ideal with him, but that of faithful filling up the basilica, and continuously seeking the guidance of their Bishop in facing challenges and situations of daily life.

THE LIFE OF A PASTOR BETWEEN SILENCE AND SERVICE

Once he became the pastor of the Church at Hippo, he never shirked in front of this task till the end of his life. He used to spend entire days in the “*secretarium*” of the basilica, a kind of parish

office, deliberating on the different cases the faithful used to bring to him, and on the endless quarrels among the citizens of Hippo. In the 4th and 5th centuries AD, Bishops were judges in all their right and would hold the so-called *audientia episcopalis*.¹⁷ This situation came about thanks a decree ratified by Emperor Constantine, the first Roman Emperor who openly favored Christianity and made it the religion of the State. In that period, Christians preferred to take their cases to the bishops of their dioceses than to go to pagan courts¹⁸ usually corrupt and excessively onerous. Augustine happened to start his ministry precisely at that particular time. That explains the burdensome nature of his task as a Bishop.

On an occasion of the celebration of his episcopal ordination anniversary with his community, he revealed his inner struggle between his apostolic duties and his deep aspiration for quiet and contemplation to them:

Nothing in this world could make me leave my rest and my tranquillity. Is there anything better, anything sweeter than to draw divine treasures without any exterior noise? It is good; it is pleasant. But preaching, reproaching, correcting, edifying, worrying over everyone, what a burden, what a work! Who would not escape from it? The Gospel sometimes frightens me!¹⁹.

¹⁷ There are few but highly researched scholarly works on this topic of utmost importance in the life of the Church in the late antiquity. The most interesting ones would include G. Vismara, *Episcopalis audientia*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 1937; K. K. Raikas, *Audientia Episcopalis*, in *Augustinianum* 37 (1997), 459-481; N. E. Lensky, *Evidence for the 'Audientia episcopalis' in the New Letters of Augustine*, in R.W. Mathisen (ed), *Law, Society, and Authority in Late Antiquity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001, 83-97; Ch. Munier, *Audientia episcopalis*, in *Augustinus-Lexikon* vol. 1, col. 511-515; E.-M. Kuhn, *Justice applied by the episcopal arbitrator: Augustine and the implementation of divine justice*, *Etica & Politica* 9, Università di Trieste, Dipartimento di Filosofia, 2007, 71-104.

¹⁸ See Saint Paul recommendations in *1Cor*. 6:1.

¹⁹ Aug., s. 339, 4 (*SPM* 1, 11): " *Nam ad istam securitatem otiosissimam nemo me vinceret: nihil est melius, nihil dulcius, quam divinum scrutari nullo strepente thesaurum; dulce est, bonum est; praedicare autem, arguere, corripere, aedificare, pro unoquoque satagere, magnum onus, magnum pondus, magnus labor. Quis non refugit istum laborem? Sed terret Evangelium.*"

In a book Augustine wrote just after his baptism, titled “*On the customs of the Catholic Church and those of the Manichaeans*,” he spoke about *Caritas*, that is, fundamentally the *caritas veritatis* (love of truth) which he sought in the peace of contemplative life. So before his ministry as a pastor, he was more of concentrating on contemplating the truth he just discovered through the grace of conversion. When he was ordained the Bishop of Hippo, he found himself facing of the *necessitas caritatis* (duty of love), adding a particular tone to the fullness of charity lived in its ecclesial dimensions. From this moment on, the life of the holy Bishop as a Christian consisted of finding a continual balance between silence and service. The silence corresponds somehow to the *Caritas veritatis* while the service is connected with the *Necessitas caritatis*. We find one of Augustine’s well-known assertion on this dimension of his life as a minister, in the *City of God*:

Our love of truth (*caritas veritatis*) makes us embrace what the duty of charity (*necessitas caritatis*) makes us endure. We must not give ourselves so much to the rest of contemplation, without also considering our being useful to our neighbor, nor surrender ourselves to act in such a way that we forget contemplation.²⁰

This mainly appeals to all ministers in the Church and most especially to us Augustinian Friars, that we may always strike a balance between the demands of our apostolate and the need for contemplation, and thus really take after our Holy Father Augustine. In the same passage quoted above, Augustine continues:

But charity and necessity (duty) must commit us to action, so that, if no one enforces this burden on us, we must seek for the contemplation of truth, and if someone requires something from us, we must comply through charity and necessity. And even then, we must not abandon

²⁰ Aug., *ciu.* XIX, 19 (CCL 48, 686): “*Interest tamen quid amore teneat veritatis, quid officio caritatis impendat. Nec sic esse quisque debet otiosus, ut in eodem otio utilitatem non cogitet proximi, nec sic actuosus, ut contemplationem non requirat Dei.*”

the sweetness of contemplation entirely, lest that, being deprived of this support, we fall under the weight of government.²¹

In all these reflections of Augustine, we can see that *Caritas* is incarnated in the Church whose servant he wholeheartedly became. And this basic experience could be at the origin of Augustine's doctrine on *Christus totus, caput et corpus* that we shall examine in a subsequent paper.

One of the most beautiful texts of the Bishop of Hippo, of his love for the Church, in its very concrete form, is certainly the letter he addressed to a friend in 429, at a time when the Vandals were attacking North Africa.²² Honorius, Bishop of Thiave, consulted Augustine on the right behavior of Pastors in the midst of the dangers threatening African cities with the arrival of Genseric and his troops. It seems that the latter's feelings were not entirely in keeping with the actual duties of a minister of God. Saint Augustine answered him in a beautiful, and firm language. This letter needs to be reread by clergymen during times of public disasters, even though in its original context, it concerned the customs and history of Christian North Africa:

Having sent Your Charity²³ a copy of the letter that I wrote for Brother Quodvultdeus, our fellow bishop, I thought that I was free of this burden that you have imposed upon me by asking advice about what you ought to do in these dangers

²¹ *Ibid.* (CCL 48,687): "*Quam sarcinam si nullus imponit, percipiendae atque intuendae vacandum est veritati; si autem imponitur, suscipienda est propter caritatis necessitatem; sed nec sic omni modo veritatis delectatio deserenda est, ne subtrahatur illa suavitas et opprimat ista necessitas*".

²² Vandals were a brutal nation, both by birth and disposition. Led by Genseric, they had entered Africa with the encouragement of Count Boniface, who, as the Roman general and governor of the Diocese of Africa invited them. But soon they turned to lawlessness, robbing private citizens and churches and killing many of the inhabitants. Their presence in North Africa brought a lot of tribulation to the people. Cf. K. Chabi, *The life and teaching of Saint Augustine*, Paulines' Publications Africa, Nairobi 2014, 88.

²³ That is a title very common and frequent in Augustine's letters and sermons to address Christians.

that have come upon our times. For, though I wrote that letter in only a few lines, I still do not think that I omitted anything that would be necessary for a respondent to say and for someone posing the question to hear, since I said that those who desire to move to fortified places, if they can, should not be stopped and that the chains of our ministry, by which the love of Christ has bound us, should not be broken, so that we do not abandon the churches that we ought to serve. These are the very words that I wrote in that letter: “The upshot is, then, I say, that we-- whose ministry is so necessary to the people of God who are staying where we are (however small their numbers) that they should not remain without it--should say to the Lord: ‘Be our protecting God and fortified place.’”²⁴

In his answer to Augustine, Honorius flared up:

If we must remain in the churches, I do not see what good we are going to do for ourselves or the people if not to see men being slain, women being raped, churches being burned, and ourselves not faltering under torture when they ask us what we do not have.”²⁵

But Saint Augustine insists firmly on the necessity of not leaving the sheep to the wolf.

²⁴ Aug., ep. 228, 1 (PL 38, 1101): “*Caritati tuae misso exemplo epistolae quam fratri Quodvultdeo nostro coepiscopo scripsi, putabam me hoc onere caruisse quod mihi imposuisti, quaerendo consilium quid in his periculis quae tempora nostra invenerunt, facere debeatis. Quamvis enim epistolam illam breviter scripserim, nihil me tamen praetermisisse arbitror, quod et respondenti dicere, et quaerenti audire sufficeret: quandoquidem dixi nec eos esse prohibendos qui ad loca, si possunt, munita migrare desiderant; et ministerii nostri vincula, quibus nos Christi caritas alligavit, ne deseramus Ecclesias quibus servire debemus, non esse rumpenda. Ista quippe verba sunt quae in illa epistola posui: ‘Restat ergo, inquam, ut nos quorum ministerium quantulaecumque plebi Dei ubi sumus manenti, ita necessarium est, ut sine hoc eam non oporteat remanere, dicamus Domino, Esto nobis in Deum protectorem, et in locum munitum’.*”

²⁵ Aug., ep., 228, 5. (CSEL 57, 487): “*Si in Ecclesiis persistendum est, quid simus nobis vel populo profuturi non video, nisi ut ante oculos nostros viri cadant, feminae constuprentur, incendantur ecclesiae, nos ipsi in tormentis deficiamus, cum de nobis quaeritur quod non habemus.*”

God is indeed able to hear the prayers of his family and to turn aside these things that they fear, and yet on account of these events, which are uncertain, we ought not to commit the certain wrong of abandoning our duty, without which the destruction of the people is certain not in matters of this life but in those of the next life, for which we ought to care with incomparably more diligence and solicitude... Let us fear more lest living stones slain when we abandon them than that the wood and stones of earthly buildings be set afire while we are there. Let us fear more lest the members of the body of Christ be killed because they are deprived of spiritual food than that the members of our body be overtaken by an enemy attack and tortured.²⁶

Augustine himself gave a living example of endurance and closeness to the people of Hippo and even of Africa, after having entrusted the direction of his diocese to his successor, Heraclius. He did not abandon his people to escape from the imminent dangers. He died in Hippo, while the Vandals were attacking the city. According to Possidius, an eyewitness of the last moments of Saint Augustine's life, "In the third month of the siege, Augustine took to bed with a fever; it was his final illness."²⁷ At the moment of his death, says Possidius, "he made no will because this poor man of God had nothing to bequeath."²⁸ But he left to his Church three great treasures; his books, his priests, his monastery. The first one was an immense treasure the robbers could not steal, nor could Vandals destroy.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 228, 5.7. (CSEL 57, 487; 490): "Potens est quidem Deus audire preces familiae suae, et haec, quae formidantur, avertere; nec ideo tamen propter ista, quae incerta sunt, debet nostri officii esse certa desertio, sine quo est plebi certa perniciēs, non in rebus vitae huius, sed alterius incomparabiliter diligentius sollicitiusque curandae... Magis timeamus ne lapides vivi exstinguantur deserentibus nobis, quam ne lapides et ligna terrenorum aedificiorum incenduntur praesentibus nobis. Magis timeamus ne membra corporis Christi destituta spiritali victu necentur, quam ne membra corporis nostri oppressa hostili impetu torqueantur."

²⁷ Possidius, *vita Aug.* 29, 3 (PL 32, 59): "Et ecce tertio illius obsidionis mense decubuit febribus, et illa ultima exercebatur aegritudine".

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 31, 6. (PL 32, 64): "Testamentum nullum fecit, quia unde faceret pauper Dei non habuit."

He left the Church, many priests, as well as monasteries of men and women, full of persons who had vowed chastity, lived obedience to their superiors, as well as libraries with his works and speeches, as well as those of other saints. We know through grace, his worth and greatness in the Church of God, He whom the faithful always find living in his works.²⁹

CONCLUSION

Augustine drank the Holy Name of Jesus from his mother's milk, and the seeds of faith in God sowed in him were not destroyed, even in the midst of the turmoil of his adolescence and his brilliant career as a rhetorician. The short-lived human life he received from his mother Monica became an abundant life, when, by divine grace, he won the life of God, through his regeneration in the womb of the Church, the "Mother of us all." Through the adventures of his professional life, Augustine met Bishop Ambrose; God used the latter to open his eyes to the light of faith. And the Milanese Bishop eventually led him to baptismal fonts, according to God's plan. Thus, Augustine went back to the faith his earthly mother managed to pass on to him. After his conversion, he wanted to live as a monk, to dedicate himself to study and meditation on the Word of life. But, leaving aside his expectations, he gave up the monastic ideal of his youth at Cassiciacum, to put all his gifts at the service of the Church (Balthasar, 1958). He dedicated himself entirely to the service of this Church he loved until the end, and whose mystery he lived in fullness. Saint Augustine remains a true model of the love a Christian should have for the Church, beyond all links of flesh and blood. Oh, that we may serve Mother Church with such love and dedication!

²⁹ *Ibid.* 31, 8 (PL 32, 64): "*Clerum sufficientissimum et monasteria virorum ac feminarum continentibus cum suis praepositis plena ecclesiae dimisit, una cum bibliothecis libros et tractatus vel suos vel aliorum sanctorum habentibus, in quibus dono Dei qualis quantus que in ecclesia fuerit noscitur, et in his semper vivere a fidelibus invenitur.*"

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