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12. From *Exemplum* to *Sacramentum*

Augustine’s Eschatological Hermeneutic of Salvation

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Abstract

Augustine always cherished a strong hope in the fulfillment of human life and history and in God’s coming judgment. He remained agnostic about the time of history’s end, or what the signs of its nearness would be, but held firmly to the Church’s hope in the resurrection of the body, and the reward of the just and punishment of sinners in bodily and spiritual ways. His writings also gradually show another, increasingly important dimension of his eschatological hope: the conviction that we, who live “extended” in time, are constantly engaged in an encounter with God’s non-spatial, timeless truth.

Keywords: eschatology, judgment of God, eternal life, resurrection of the body, millennium, hope

Introduction

In his time, St. Augustine was considered an authority on most subjects. So, in the autumn of 419 or 420, he received a letter from Hesychius, the archbishop of Salonae – today’s city of Split – on the distant Dalmatian coast.¹ They had never met, but Hesychius wanted to know his famous African colleague’s opinion on whether the end of the world was near. For 25 years and more before he wrote, a sense of anxiety seems to have gripped the hearts of many Christians in the Latin West, as they reflected on “the signs of the times.” It was a time of relative prosperity, surely, and Christians remained legally free, as they had been for almost a century, to practice their faith in peace; being a member of the Christian Church, in fact, had even become a positive qualification for rising in the public esteem. Yet Christian thinkers and writers were now wondering aloud (as Americans do today) whether the new dangers the Empire faced – especially uncontrolled immigration, in the form of massive migration from the north and east of aggressive, migrant Germanic peoples, and such dramatic effects of that immigration as the sack of Rome by Visigoths in 410 – might not signify the imminent end of the Roman Empire, and even of human history.

The summer of 419 had also witnessed new natural disasters that might themselves be additional signs of the end: climate change, in the shape of widespread drought; earthquakes in Palestine and North Africa; even an eclipse of the sun. Bishop Hesychius, perplexed and probably pressured by his clergy and people to provide pastoral guidance, wrote to the one man whose reputation as an interpreter of Scripture seemed to promise a reliable answer to all of their questions: were these the catastrophes predicted in the books of Daniel and Revelation, and even by Jesus himself, as signs that the final judgment was at hand?

Augustine’s reply to Hesychius was modest, respectful, and fairly brief. He stressed the importance of Jesus’ words to his Apostles in the Gospels and the beginning of Acts: “It is not for you to know the time or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority.” (Acts 1:7; cf. Mark 13:32; Matthew 24:36) To help the bishop make up his own mind, he enclosed a copy of what he saw as pertinent passages from his contemporary Jerome’s *Commentary on Daniel*, and politely invited the bishop to share further whatever insights on the time of the end he might have himself. He concluded the letter by asking Hesychius to

accept this answer of ours as the work of someone who would surely prefer to have knowledge than ignorance about the things you have asked of me; but since I am not yet able to have it, I prefer to profess an ignorance that is careful than a knowledge that is false (*Ep.* 197.5).²

In other words, it is usually best to admit what you do not know.

Hesychius – perhaps to Augustine’s surprise – *did* reply, thanking him for his letter, but also respectfully questioning his agnostic approach. Clearly the God who governs the times and the seasons *is* able to reveal future events to his prophets and to those who read them.

¹ This letter appears in the collection of Augustine’s letters as *Ep.* 196 (419). In referring to Augustine’s works in these notes, I will give the dates – when sufficiently known – after the citation (all dates belong to the common era); this will be based mainly on tables in Fitzgerald.

² “Magis eligo cautius ignorantiam confiteri, quam falsam scientiam profiteri.”

Even if Jesus refused to disclose the details of the end to his disciples, other inspired writers must surely have had detailed knowledge. Further, the final “appearing” of the Lord is not a topic for Christians to avoid, but to “love and long for” (*Ep.* 198.4, alluding to 2 Timothy 4:8). Although it may not be possible to calculate the time and place of that coming exactly, Hesychius nevertheless felt that contemporary events suggested it was very near. Even though he did not claim particular qualifications as an exegete, he writes, “still when I see and believe the signs that there are of his coming, it seems both fitting for me to expect him soon, and to provide this nourishment for the faithful, that they might ‘love his coming’ with that same degree of expectation” (*Ep.* 198.5).

Characteristically, Augustine was unwilling to let such an important discussion go unfinished; he replied to this second letter with a detailed, extended tract of his own on the end of the world, as foretold in Scripture (*Ep.* 199).³ After pointing out various dimensions of the enigmas of human history, Augustine readily affirms Hesychius’s central point, that every faithful Christian should, as Paul urges, “love and long for” the coming of the Lord during our whole “pilgrimage” in this world. This does not mean, however, that Christians should try to calculate the time of history’s end exactly; it simply makes clear that we must live always prepared to meet the Lord, whether at the end of history or at the time of our own death. “It is not the one who affirms that the Lord is near who ‘loves his coming,’” he says, “any more than it is the one who waits for him, whether near or far away, with sincere faith, with unshakeable hope, and with ardent love” (*Ep.* 199.15).

Augustine goes on to dismantle some of the more common ways believers have tried to wrest factual predictions and concrete dates out of the Bible’s apocalyptic imagery, then observes that the signs of the end that are posted so dramatically in Scripture are, in fact, always with us: heresy, violence, rampant wickedness, the oppression of the just. Christians have always been convinced, he says, that they are living in the last days, and surely they have always been right:

Those were last days then; how much more so now, even if as many days still remain until the end as have passed between the ascension of the Lord until today – or if there should be more, or less! We simply do not know, because “it is not for us to know the times” or the moments “which the Father has kept in his power” (Acts 1:7). Nevertheless, we *do* know that we live in the last times, in the last days, in the last hour – as the Apostles did. Those who lived after them and before us did so more than the Apostles, and *we* do so still more, and those who will come after us even more than we, until it comes to those who will be, one might say, the last of the last – and to that one who is last of all, whom the Lord refers to when he says, “I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:40). But how far away that is cannot be known (*Ep.* 199.24).

To live in the last days, he seems to be saying, refers more to the quality of our lives of faith than it does to chronology. Many of the New Testament’s statements about the time of the end in fact seem to refer back to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE; others seem not to

³ See *Civ.* 20.5.4, where Augustine refers to this letter as exemplifying the approach he favors towards mining the Scriptures for eschatological information: carefully comparing the details of particular texts.

refer to historical events at all but suggest the coming of Christ in the sacramental life of the Church. As for Jesus's prophecy that the gospel must be preached to the whole world before he comes, Augustine suggests that both the time and the signs of fulfilment for that promise are simply hidden; we do not fully know how far humanity extends, or when the gospel will reach them all.

Near the close of the letter, Augustine suggests that there are three possible attitudes a person who "loves the Lord's coming" might take towards the time of the end of the world. One could say, "Let us watch and pray, because he is coming soon"; one might also say, "Let us watch and pray, because this life is short and uncertain, although the Lord's coming is far away;" or one can say, "Let us watch and pray, because this life *is* short and uncertain, and we *do not know* when the Lord will come!" (*Ep.* 199.53). For Augustine, this third attitude clearly represents the expectation that is most solidly and broadly grounded in Christian faith.

This second, longer letter to Hesychius clearly reveals the bishop of Hippo's command of Scripture, as well as his long experience in interpreting it in a moderately figural way. More characteristically, perhaps, it also reveals the tendency one finds in virtually all Augustine's work, from his earliest days at Hippo to his mature sermons and tracts, to distinguish between what one might call the "eschatological *scenario*" faithful Christians have distilled from the Bible, and a more all-pervasive, Christologically centered sense of God's eschatological *presence* in history that is not necessarily to be understood as part of a narrative sequence at all, but that is simply a dimension of God's own timeless immanence in creation. The believer who has grasped, in some halting way, the meaning of the Incarnation of God the Son, recognizes along with that insight of faith that he or she is living at the edge of time itself, peering (through Christ) beyond the world of history and events and institutions that we know, beyond even scriptural testimony and the faith that responds to it, into an abyss of mystery where all is unified, reconciled and made luminous in the life-giving, infinite being of God. We *all* live in the last hour, as Augustine confessed to Hesychius, because we are all called to move, even now, beyond the cumulative hours of the history that makes us disciples here in time, and into the timeless peace of God's own life. Let me try to explain what I mean.

The Nearness of the End

Augustine was certainly convinced that the Bible offers us reliable information about our human history, past and future. In a number of his earlier, largely anti-Manichaean, works – after his return to Africa in 388 – he even engages, with a kind of speculative delight, the old Roman idea of ages of the world's history that parallel the six ages or natural periods of a human life (e.g., *Gn. adv. Man.* 1.35-41 [388-389]; *Div. qu.* 58.2 [391-395]; *S.* 259.2 [before 394]; *Cat. rud.* 22.39 [399]; *C. Faust.* 12.8 [c. 400]; *Io. eu. tr.* 9.6 [c. 407]). So in *De vera religione*, written in 390 for his old friend and patron Romanianus in the hope of luring him away from Manichaean Gnosis to biblical faith, Augustine plots out the development of the biblical revelation of truth, understood from the Christian perspective – what twentieth-century theologians would call "salvation history" – as a growth from feeble human inquisitiveness, nourished on the scriptural stories, to a final contemplative wisdom that is ready to let go of earthly knowledge altogether (*Vera rel.* 26.48-49). So the people of faith begins its collective history as infants, feeding on the breasts of the Hebrew Scripture; in the light of Christ's coming and teaching, they then embark on a fruitful, inquiring childhood, blessed with reason

and enriched with longer memory; in the third age, a kind of late adolescence, they become (theologically) generative as well, marrying faith in the biblical narrative with reason to produce a reflective progeny of doctrine; then, in the vital prime of adulthood, they enhance this faith with an engagement in the world of public affairs, and the readiness to suffer publicly for it as martyrs; in the fifth age of seniority, they reach peace “amid the wealth and abundance of the unchanging kingdom . . . of Wisdom” – they are politically and socially secure enough, in other words, to engage theological issues publicly and authoritatively, and to move towards Empire-wide consensus: a mirror, undoubtedly, of the post-Constantinian Church; and in the sixth and final age of history, *senectus*, like an old person who finds his human health deteriorating, they forget about doctrinal quarrels altogether, and reach beyond this earthly wisdom for the divine. “The seventh age,” he observes, which is still ahead of us “is eternal rest and everlasting bliss, not to be divided into any ages. For just as the end of the old man is death, so the end of the new man is eternal life” (*Vera rel.* 26.49 [390]; E. Hill 2005: 62).

Along with this attempt to schematize Christian history, human and religious, in a way parallel to the traditional pattern of the seven ages of a human life, the early Augustine occasionally attempted to unify such a model with the notion of a coming *millennium* of rest and abundance for the just, cherished by a number of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writers and apparently promised for the Church in Revelation 20:4-6. In some earlier works, Augustine even conceived of such a millennium as the seventh and final age of actual human history, when “the Church will be manifested here in great glory and dignity and justice” (*S.* 259.2)⁴ – after a “first resurrection” of the faithful but before the coming of Christ in final judgment and the new eighth day of eternity (see *C. Adim.* 2.2 [394]; *S.* 259.2 [c. 400]; *S. Mai* 94.4-5 [after 410]; for a thorough discussion of Christian millenarianism in the second century, see C. Hill). And the way it was communicated to the faithful was, above all, liturgical. As our friend William Harmless has observed, in his foundational work on Augustine’s practice of the catechumenate, for the bishop of Hippo

the vast scope of history converged – albeit via liturgical signs and passing feelings – within Easter Week. On the sixth day of creation, God had impressed his image on humankind; in the sixth age of history, Christ had restored that image; and so at the vigil, “as if on the sixth day of the whole era, we are renovated in baptism so that we may received our maker’s image.” On the seventh day of creation, God rested; in the seventh day of history, the future rest of the saints on this earth will take place; and so the Church had celebrated a seven-day sabbath. Finally, on the eighth day, Christ rose with body renewed, separating light from dark as on the first day of creation; and in the eighth and final age, “we shall return to that immortality, that blessedness, from which humankind tumbled.” It was for this reason that “the Octave brings to fulfillment the sacraments of the *infantes*” (334-35, citing his own translation of *S.* 260C.2-6).

In the liturgy, the early Augustine saw a mirror of the progress of time itself.

⁴ *S.* 259 probably dates from 394, when Augustine was still a presbyter at Hippo.

By the last two decades of his life, however, Augustine rejected such a historicizing understanding of Revelation 20 as overly materialistic, and tells us, in *De civitate Dei* 20.7, that he prefers to understand this final, idealized time of millennial peace as signifying either this present age of the Church, formed into the whole Christ by the Holy Spirit and waiting for the final appearance of Christ the head, or else as the end-time of human history itself, in which God's work of creation quietly nears its fulfilment (*Civ.* 20.7 [425/426]). The world, like an octogenarian, is running out of energy, he remarks in a sermon probably from 410 or 411; but, Christ, present in our midst, makes us youthful again: "He came when everything had grown old, and he has made you as good as new . . . Don't be eager to cling to an aged world, and unwilling to grow young in Christ" (*S.* 81.8 [410/411]; E. Hill 1991a: 365). Ages and millennia are above all figures of God's saving work.

This is not to say that Augustine saw all the Bible's apparent information about the future fate of the world and its inhabitants simply as metaphors for the spiritual life. On the contrary: after he was ordained a bishop and became more personally invested in catechesis and doctrinal controversy, Augustine grew steadily clearer about what people of faith should expect at the end of time. *Christ's second coming* to judge the world, at the end of this present history, is certain, and will coincide with the resurrection of all the dead (so, e.g., *Qu. eu.* 1.15 [399/400]; *Civ.* 20.45). In this present age, as he emphasizes in the later books of *The City of God*, God's judgments on human actions, and the justice of God's response, remain simply too unclear, and almost demand to be revealed in their goodness to every conscious being (*Civ.* 20.1-3). So also the *resurrection of the bodies* of all the dead at that time will be complete and in some way material, even if the actual details and form of the general resurrection remain veiled in imagery (*Civ.* 20.10, 20-21; see also *En. Ps.* 70.3 [414/415]; *Io. eu. tr.* 23.13-15 [413 CE]; *Ench.* 23.84-92 [419-422]). The *final state of unconverted sinners* will of necessity be eternal separation from God, he insists from his earliest works on:⁵ eternal alienation from the light of Truth,⁶ plus their endless suffering in soul and body, in a fire that must be understood as material as well as spiritual (see, esp., *Civ.* 21.9-27 [425-427]). This ultimate separation of sinners from God Augustine frequently refers to as a "second death," confirming by divine judgment the self-imposed first death of sin (see *Trin.* 4.5 [400-410]; *S.* 65.5-6 [405-415]; *Civ.* 13.12 [418-419]). Although immortal in the sense that it always remains in some kind of conscious existence, the damned soul, in the language of Matthew 10:28 is said to have been "killed" by God "because God, its life, has forsaken it" (*S.* 65.6). Scripture clearly promises such eternal punishment, and Augustine goes to great lengths, in his *Enchiridion* and in *De civitate Dei* 21, to refute the views of "tender-hearted Christians" who hold out a hope for some sort of universal salvation (*Ench.* 93, 111-13; *Civ.* 21.23 [425-427]).

For the just, on the other hand, Augustine argues that Scripture also promises a future *life without end* in a reconstituted material body, incorruptible and resplendent in beauty, continuous in form with our present body but free from the physical and moral limitations of the flesh, fully subject to the righteous desires of the spirit (so *Ench.* 23.91; *Civ.* 22.21 [425-427

⁵ See, e.g., *Vera rel.* 52.101: "Let us make haste to be delivered from the second death, in which there is no one who remembers God"; see also the much later *Ench.* 29.113: "That perpetual death of the damned, which is separation from the life of God, will last forever and will be the same for all" (Harbert: 338).

⁶ He emphasizes this intellectual self-contradiction of the damned in *Vera rel.* 52.101.

CE; see also *S.* 242.8-11 [405-410]; *Civ.* 13.20; 14.3 [417/419]). The heart of the blessed life of the saved will be the *visio Dei*, the ability of human creatures to contemplate God eternally – a spiritual union of the conscious mind with the invisible living, triune reality of God, which is best called *wisdom*⁷ – but also the *vision* of a transformed material creation with our bodily eyes, in which the life-giving presence of God in things will be invisible but apparent, as health now is in a living organism (*Civ.* 22.29). Even *after death* in this present age, the future rewards of the just and the punishment of sinners will begin, although they will only be a foretaste of their final state (*S.* 328.5 [405/411]; *S.* 280.5; *Ep.* 159.4 [414/415]; *Ep.* 164.8 [414]).⁸ Augustine even cautiously raises the possibility, in his *Enchiridion*, that some souls of the deceased are saved from their attachments to perishable things in the purifying fire mentioned in 1 Corinthians 3:13-15 (*Ench.* 18.69); later in the same work he insists that the souls of the dead benefit from the prayers and almsgiving of their friends on earth, and “the sacrifice of the Mediator offered for them,” provided that while on earth they “have deserved that they would later benefit from them” (*Ench.* 29.110).⁹ This comprehensive picture of human existence beyond death, which Augustine developed over three decades of reflection and pastoral ministry, taken together, provides the basic structure for the Western Church’s understanding of Christian eschatology as a prophetic narrative of the future, from the writings of the medieval scholastics even into modern times: a unified, biblically based scenario for both the world’s end and the end of our present lives.

The Nearness of Truth

Even in his early works, however, Augustine frequently emphasizes that the details of biblical prophecy point, significantly, not only to coming events but to deeper truths, which in themselves are timeless, eternal: truths implied by the single, infinite Truth, which God is, and which is revealed to human minds in this present age only through the voices and events that command our faith and trust. In *De vera religione*, for instance, his magisterial apologia for scriptural faith from 390, Augustine insists, as he often does, that the human mind can only tell truth from falsehood because it is enlightened by a prior and continuous apprehension of Truth itself, something not conditioned by time and space. He writes:

There is nothing past in the eternal and nothing future, because what is past has ceased to be and what is future has not yet begun to be. Eternity, however, simply *is*, nor ever was as though it is not any longer, nor ever will be as though it is not yet. This is why [Truth] alone was able most truly to say to the human mind, “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14) (*Vera rel.* 49.97; E. Hill 2005: 95).

The human mind cannot presently have direct access to this eternal Truth in its fullness but comes to know it obliquely through the events and things of history, as it forms judgments

⁷ See especially *Trin.* 14.24-26, where Augustine insists that this final vision will bring to perfection the image of God in the created mind.

⁸ See also his remarks on his friend Nebridius, who after death must repose in “the bosom of Abraham,” and already know God and be known by him (*Conf.* 9.3.6).

⁹ See also *Cura mort.*, addressed to Paulinus of Nola in 422, in which Augustine also affirms the importance of praying and offering the Eucharistic sacrifice of Christ for the dead, provided they have previously lived in a way suiting them to benefit from these actions of the living.

about finite truth in the world. So, the goal of our present religious knowledge, he insists to Romanianus in this work, is to develop a kind of habitual discernment in reading and interpreting Scripture, and so to learn how to ascend from its narrative of historical events and moral rules to a vision of God's timeless reality. He continues:

So let us then pinpoint, and not confuse, what trust we should place in historical narrative, what trust we should place in understanding (*intelligentia*), what we should commit to memory without knowing that it is true, but still believing it is, and where the truth is that does not come and go but remains in one and the same way, . . . and what use faith in temporal realities is for understanding and obtaining eternal ones, in which is to be found the *end* of all good actions (*Vera rel.* 50.99; E. Hill 2005: 95-96).

This ability to seek for an eternal meaning in historical words and events turns us, Augustine argues, to seek ultimate goals rather than sensual or intellectual satisfaction in the present.

Small wonder if this will be given to those who set their hearts on truth alone where knowledge is concerned, and on peace alone where action is concerned, and on health (*salus*) alone where the body is concerned. What they set their hearts on more than anything in this life, you see, will be theirs after this life in full perfection (*Vera rel.* 53.103; E. Hill 2005: 98).

To search for abiding truth in Scripture as something present and accessible, starting from the Church's faith that Scripture tells the story of the entry of eternal Truth into history, brings us into contact with a different kind of end-reality, a different finality, from simply the promised temporal future. It is a search for God himself as our end, for the timeless in time, for the truth that gives us well-being and permanence in the midst of our present experience of conflict and confusion. It is, I suggest, a different form of eschatology from the story of God's end-game.

This perspective on the relation of eternity, as God's way of being, to the temporal change and instability that are proper to us within created history is of course a central preoccupation of Augustine in the *Confessions* – his prolonged meditation on our common existence as creatures, which was written in thirteen books between 397 and 401. This work, so well known and so difficult to interpret, weaves together Scripture, philosophical reflection, and spiritual rumination with stunning rhetorical genius: the first nine of the work's meditations or books anchored in Augustine's memories of major stages in his way towards union with God, the whole of it anything but autobiography in a modern sense.¹⁰ In this context, the relation of time to the timeless, of faith growing from human events to a contemplative love and union that is beyond any reference to historical sequence, is clearly a central theme.

Anyone who has read the *Confessions* carefully will remember Augustine's prolonged meditation on time itself in book 11 – the first of the three decisively important final sections

¹⁰ Peter Brown, in his introduction to the republished edition of Frank Sheed's classic translation of the *Confessions*, suggests plausibly that the work was originally intended to be read aloud, in thirteen sections that each would have taken about an hour to perform (Sheed: xvii). The rhetorical magic, the frequent scriptural allusions, and the deeply introspective character of the work make better sense when seen as a set of highly sophisticated guided meditations.

of the work, which turn the reader's gaze beyond the details of Augustine's personal path to faith and Christian ministry, towards broader, more general considerations of the life of conscious creatures in creation. In book 11, Augustine famously unrolls the argument that time is not so much a dimension of what we would call objective reality, as a feature of our human consciousness of change and motion in the world around us. Our world is always moving, always changing; change is part of what Augustine calls "extension" (*distentio*). As beings with spatial limits and thus with a particular spatial location, we must move from place to place in order to be elsewhere and must change from one condition to another in order to become more completely or more finally what we potentially are from the start. Time is not, in Augustine's view, a proper quality of any particular form of motion – the motion of the planets, the change of seasons, even (in our modern world) nuclear degeneration; time is the way a personal subject – in himself or herself, a focus of consciousness without extension, an intellectual point – *measures* that motion, that change, in the ever-shifting physical world where he or she is presently embodied. Augustine writes:

My confession to you is surely truthful, when my soul declares that times are measured by me . . . I measure the motion of a body by time. Then am I not measuring time itself? . . . That is why I have come to think that time is simply a distention. But of what is it a distention? I do not know, but it would be surprising if it is not that of the mind itself (*Conf.* 11.33; Chadwick: 239-40).

For Augustine, the consciousness of time – of narrative sequence and memory and expectation – is inseparably tied up with existing as a subject in a universe of limited, and so measurable, realities. For that very reason, time and what it measures are not ultimate things, not part of ultimate Truth. Time, sequentiality, active movement and passive transformation, are part of our existence as spread out in our present space, not part of God's eschatological life.

So, Augustine's quest in the *Confessions* is really to show how such a subject as each of us is, limited by *distentio* and constantly involved in change and spatial motion, comes to discover his or her anchoring and ultimate welfare in a reality that is *beyond* this space, beyond change or limitation, and that invites us to find permanence and stability in it for ourselves. In the powerful reflection on God's way of being that opens the work, Augustine attempts to characterize the creator:

Who then are you, my God? . . . Most high, utterly good, utterly powerful, utterly omnipotent, most merciful and most just, deeply hidden yet most intimately present, perfection of both beauty and strength, stable and incomprehensible, immutable yet changing all things, . . . always active, always in repose, gathering to yourself but not in need; supporting and filling and protecting, creating and nurturing and bringing to maturity; searching, though to you nothing is lacking . . . Who will enable me to find rest in you? Who will grant me that you come to my heart and intoxicate it, so that I forget my evils and embrace my one and only good – yourself? (*Conf.* 1.4-5; Chadwick: 4-5)

To Augustine, God is not only our source, as creatures, but the goal of our change and the rest that succeeds present motion. God is our end.

And God has made himself uniquely and irrevocably available in time, for the Christian, by the Incarnation of the Word, his eternal Son. In choosing to be born son of Mary, to be an obscure first-century Jew, the eternal Word “has built for himself a humble house of clay” (*Conf.* 7.18.25; Chadwick: 128), in order to invite time-bound mortals to become weak with him in humble adoration. So, in a celebrated passage in the middle of in book 7, Augustine describes his discovery – with the help of philosophy, but in a way that points him towards the first chapter of John – of this relationship of the distended subject to a God who is beyond, yet present in, both time and space:

With you as my guide, I entered into my innermost citadel, and was given power to do so because you had become my helper. I entered and with my soul’s eye, such as it was, saw above that same eye of my soul the immutable light higher than my mind . . . It transcended my mind, not in the way that oil floats on water, nor as heaven is above the earth. It was superior because it made me, and I was inferior because I was made by it. The person who knows the truth knows it, and he who knows it knows eternity. Love knows it. Eternal truth and true love and beloved eternity: you are my God. To you I sigh “day and night” (Psalm 42:2). When I first came to know you, you raised me up to make me see that what I saw is Being, and that I who saw am not yet being. And you gave a shock to the weakness of my sight by the strong radiance of your rays, and I trembled with love and awe. And I found myself far from you in “the region of dissimilarity,” and heard as it were your voice from on high: “I am the food of the fully grown; grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into you, like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me” (*Conf.* 7.10.16; Chadwick: 123-24).

The *Confessions*, like so many of Augustine’s more spiritual works, is really an extended meditation on how the conscious creature slowly discovers the infinite, eternal reality of God for himself or herself, and is transformed in the process, despite human weakness and limitation, into God’s image. In encountering God here, we encounter our origin and our end, our *eschaton*. Eschatology, for Augustine, is not just thought about “last things,” but reflection on how that process of finding the presence of God might reach its goal.

Augustine’s most revealing discussion of this process, it seems to me, comes in book 4 of his great, untidy work on God, *De Trinitate*, begun probably a few years after he had finished writing the *Confessions*, and brought to at least a rough conclusion in the mid-420s. The first two books of *De Trinitate* focus the reader on the biblical basis for the Church’s teaching that God simply *is* Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, “in the inseparable equality of one substance” (*Trin.* 1.4; E. Hill 1991b: 67). After then discussing, in book 3, what was, for the ancients, the vexed question of how this trinitarian God revealed himself in the Old Testament, Augustine turns, in book 4, to identifying the heart of the Bible’s revelation of the trinitarian mystery: the sending or mission of God the eternal Son into history as a human being, by the power and anointing of the Holy Spirit, in order to lead a sinful and forgetful human race back to the Father, “by the road [God] has made in the humanity of the divinity of his only Son” (*Trin.* 4.1; E. Hill 1991b: 153). Here in the person of Christ, Augustine emphasizes, the changeless God meets us directly in our own changeability and draws us close into his saving Truth.

Created in time and space by the Word of God, who is unchanging Truth in his own person, mutable humans soon came to be blinded by their own pride and self-seeking and wandered far away. We needed cleansing and reconciliation, as Scripture makes clear; but these had to be done, within fallen humanity, by an opposing force:

The only thing to cleanse the wicked and the proud is the blood of the just man and the humility of God; to contemplate God, which by nature we are not, we would have to be cleansed by him who became what by nature we are and what by sin we are not. By nature we are not God; by nature we are men; by sin we are not just. So God became a just man to intercede with God for sinful man (*Trin.* 4.4; E. Hill 1991b: 155).

And since the effect of the history of sin on all of us, in the biblical narrative, is both a fleshly mortality that God had not originally intended, and the moral mortality of our souls, the incarnate Son of God had to offer us, in his own brief history, a means of healing for both.

Each thing of ours, that is, both soul and body, was in need of healing and resurrection, in order to renew for the better what had changed for the worse. Now the death of the soul is ungodliness (*impietas*), and the death of the body is perishability, which ends in the soul's departure from the body. Just as the soul dies when God leaves it, so does the body when the soul leaves it. It becomes lifeless in this process, as the soul becomes wisdomless in that. The soul is resuscitated by repentance, and in the still mortal body the renewal of life takes its start from faith, by which one "believes in him who justifies the ungodly" (Romans 4:5) (*Trin.* 4.5; E. Hill 1991b: 155).

So Augustine, following Paul in Romans, builds the argument that it is by the mission of the Son, incarnate in our humanity and freely offering himself in it to the Father on the cross, that both our moral and our physical death are done away with: our moral death of sin through the model Jesus offers of human suffering and its implication of penance, and our physical mortality through his resurrection from the dead. He writes:

To balance this double death of ours the savior paid in his single one, and to achieve each resurrection of ours he pre-enacted and presented his one and only one, by way of sacrament (*sacramentum*) and by way of model (*exemplum*) . . . Being clothed with mortal flesh, in that alone he died and in that alone he rose again; and so in that alone he harmonized with each part of us, by becoming in that flesh the sacrament for the inner man and the model for the outer one.

As a sacrament of our inner man [i.e., a saving mystery for our souls], he uttered that cry, both in the psalm and on the cross, which was intended to represent the death of our soul: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" . . . By the crucifixion of the inner man is to be understood the sorrows of repentance and a kind of salutary torment of self-discipline . . .

Again, the Lord's death is the model (*exemplum*) for the death of our outer man, because such sufferings were the greatest possible encouragement to his servants "not to fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul" (Matthew

10:28) . . . Likewise, the resurrection of the Lord's body is found to serve as a model for our outer man's resurrection . . . So then, the one death of our savior was our salvation from our two deaths, and his one resurrection bestowed two resurrections on us (*Trin.* 4.6; E. Hill 1991b: 156-57).

In this rather complicated argument, Augustine seems to be making the point that the paschal mystery of Christ – his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead – heals us from the burdens of sin and death, both by providing a historical paradigm, an *exemplum*, for what we hope for in our own future bodily resurrection – in the eschatological scenario yet to be realized – and by offering us also a *sacramentum*, an avenue of ritualized, spiritual integration now into the process of transformation, which is realized here in time by pointing us now to God's timeless, merciful presence. The *eschaton* – our identification with the risen and glorified Christ – is presented here by Augustine, in other words, as both future and present, as part of our history that is still to come, exemplified already in Christ's resurrection, and also as a mystery presently enfolding us in the sacramental life of the community of faith, which points us beyond history. "For you have died," Paul reminds the Colossians, "and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Colossians 3:3-4). Or as Augustine puts it in one of his Paschal sermons, "The resurrection of the Lord Jesus is the distinctive mark (*forma*) of the Christian faith" (*S.* 229H.1 [after 412]; E. Hill 1993: 295).¹¹

In the terminology of Augustine's *De Trinitate*, the historical knowledge by which we are led to become disciples of Jesus and to live by the gospel is the knowledge of *faith*: necessary even in everyday affairs, if we are to move beyond a self-enclosed skepticism, but still a kind of knowledge bounded by time, and by the verbal contingencies of human testimony and argument. We know Christ now *only* by faith – the faith of the Christian community, which itself is based on Scripture as received and interpreted in the Church. But faith, which builds on credible human witness, is always oriented to *vision*, to that participative, timeless, fully eschatological knowing that unites subject and object in love, and which Augustine will later call *wisdom* (see, e.g., *Trin.* 12.22). So, he writes, near the end of book 4 of *De Trinitate*:

Eternal life is promised us by the Truth, from whose transparent clarity our faith is as far removed as mortality is from eternity. So now we accord faith to the things done in time for our sakes, and are purified by it, in order that when we come to sight, and truth succeeds to faith, eternity might succeed to mortality. Our faith will then become truth, when we come to what we are promised as believers; but what we are promised is eternal life, and the Truth said – not the truth our faith will become in the future, but the Truth which is always Truth, because it is eternity – the Truth said, "This is eternal life, that they should know you, the one true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3). Therefore when our faith becomes truth by seeing, our

¹¹ This statement appears almost in the same form in a number of Augustine's sermons for the Paschal season: e.g., *S.* 241.1 [411]. On the centrality of hope in the bodily resurrection for each of us, and of the prospect of God's judgment, in basic Christian catechesis, see *Cat. md.* 7.11 [between 399 and 405].

mortality will be transformed into a fixed and firm eternity (*Trin.* 2.24; E. Hill 1991b: 169-70).

In the *eschaton*, faith will give way to wisdom and to love; even now, in the Church and its sacraments, that transformation begins.

Our contact with the dead and risen Jesus in faith, in other words, is both the promise and the beginning of that deeper relationship of unity with God – with Father and Son and Holy Spirit, in distinct yet related ways – which is held out to us as the fulfilment of our eschatological hope. This unity will be realized fully after the present life, in the *vision* that succeeds faith, the vision that will make us blessed. Yet even now, before the end-time, we have some sense of what the *life* promised in that vision is; if the death of the soul, in eschatological terms, is separation from God (*S.* 65.6), union with God now through Christ and his Church is the beginning of eternal life. Christ's resurrection from death foreshadows it; our contact with his risen life by faith and in the sacraments initiates us into it. So, in his *Enarratio 1 on Psalm 88*, the first of a pair of splendid *Enarrationes* preached in Carthage sometime during the first decade of the fifth century, Augustine sets about explaining the Psalmist's phrase, "I will build you a throne to last from generation to generation" in terms of the life of the Church, as including both its present and its future generations:

There is the generation of flesh and blood at the present time; but there will be a different generation at the resurrection of the dead. Christ is preached here, and he will be preached there, too; but here he is preached in order that people may believe in him, there he will be preached that they may see him.

"I will build you a throne to last from generation to generation." Even now Christ is enthroned in us, for his throne has been built up in us. If he were not enthroned within us he would not be ruling and guiding us, and if we were not guided by him, we would blunder and fall under our own guidance. He is enthroned in us and reigns over us; but he is enthroned also in that other generation, the one that shall be when the dead rise again. Christ will reign for all eternity in his saints (*En Psal.* 88.5 [given in Carthage, sometime between 399 and 411, probably on September 13, two days before the feast of St. Cyprian]; Boulding: 276-77).

The kingdom of God, announced by Jesus as the fulfilment of God's historical promises, already has begun in the life of those struggling here to believe and to live out their Christian faith in love; Christ reigns in them now, directs their lives now. But the eschatological or final fullness of that reign is clearly a promise held out for the Church's future beyond time, when all will have been raised to live as a new generation, eternally transformed, in the presence of God.

In *De vera religione*, a decade or two earlier, Augustine had written to Romanianus that Christian believers already "taste and see that the Lord is sweet."

Nor will there be any doubt what is in store for them after this life, and here their perfection consists in being nourished by faith, hope and charity. After this life, though, knowledge, too, will be perfected, because "now we know in part, but when what is perfect has come" (1 Corinthians 13:9-10), there will be

no “in part,” and every kind of peace will be enjoyed (*Vera rel.* 53.103; E. Hill 2005: 98).

To “love the Lord’s coming,” as he would later write to Hesychius of Salonae, did not necessarily involve a prediction of *when* he would come, in the glory of final judgment, or an exact idea of what might happen when he *does* come. It was simply a matter of loving him as he had already come, as he was now present in the figured mysteries, the *sacramenta* of Scripture and conversion, of Baptism and Eucharist. And it was to know that however far away in time and space the risen Lord might seem, in fact, for the wakeful heart, he is always near. Mysterious as the time and manner of the historical *eschaton* remains, the personal *eschaton* – Christ himself – is already with us as our Lord.

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