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## Augustine on Heart and Life

### Essays in Memory of William Harmless, S.J.

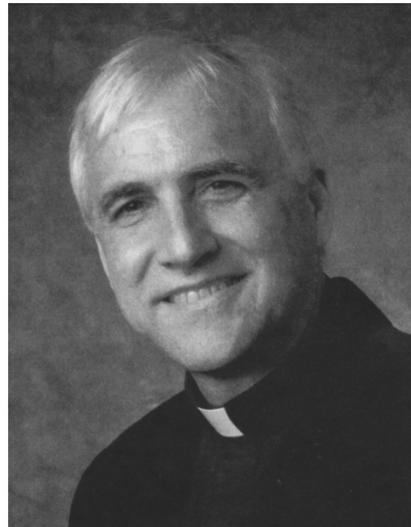
Edited by John J. O'Keefe and Michael Cameron

#### Introduction

John J. O'Keefe, Creighton University

When Bill Harmless died in October of 2014 he left behind more than just an impressive record of scholarly production. He also left a network of students, friends and colleagues whose lives he touched in ways no written summary can capture.

At 61, Bill died in his scholarly prime. Between 2004 and 2014 he published in succession *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (2004), *Mystics* (2008) and *Augustine in His Own Words* (2010). In between these major works, he published at least eleven scholarly articles and book chapters. Just days before his death, he submitted the final proofs of his revision of his early and influential work *Augustine and the Catechumenate*.



The purpose of this volume is to recognize Bill's remarkable intellectual achievement by bestowing upon him posthumously the *Festschrift* that he would certainly have received had his career followed its normal course and ended in retirement. These essays are an offering by some of Bill's colleagues from Creighton University and the North American Patristic Society. Both are communities that were very close to Bill's heart. We gathered in Omaha, at Creighton in the spring of 2016 to celebrate his life by spending two days reflecting, appropriately, on the theology and contribution of Saint Augustine. Some of the essays of this collection riff on the theme of Bill's final work, an incomplete book entitled *Augustine & the Mystery of the Human Heart*. Others do not. All are offered in the spirit of thanksgiving for the friendship we enjoyed.

As noted above, at the time of his death, Bill was in the early stages of writing a major new book on Augustine. We have included the introduction and mostly-completed first chapter of *Augustine & the Mystery of the Human Heart, opus imperfectum*, which he was actively working on at the time of his death. We have also included an unpublished essay on ancient monasticism, "Desert Silence: Why the *Apophthegmata Patrum* is Reticent about Christology," a topic which, along with Augustine, was one of Bill's great scholarly loves. Finally, readers will find preserved here links to Bill's popular *Bibliographies for Theology*. While we have added no new content, these bibliographies will doubtless be a valuable resource for many years to come.

We conclude this introduction with a retrospective offered by one of Bill's junior colleagues at Creighton University.

### **Bill Harmless: The Gift of a Great Mentor by Jay Carney**

At the end of a long job interview day at Creighton in 2010, I called my parents to check in. My Dad asked the expected question. "Well, how did everything go?" I responded, "The interviews went fine overall. But the highlight was talking indie music with this fascinating Jesuit in Omaha's downtown record shop!" My enthusiasm reflected many people's memorable encounters with the remarkable man who was William J. Harmless.

The captivating personality of Bill Harmless reflected the man's own diverse gifts. He was one of the world's leading scholars on Augustine of Hippo, channeling in his own writings the famous *eloquentia* of the great Western father. He was perhaps the most widely read scholar I encountered in my early years at Creighton, a man with an almost encyclopedic grasp of scholarly developments across the fields of theology, history, philosophy, biblical studies, and even the natural sciences. He was also a Christian scholar, joking with me before Creighton's *Phi Beta Kapa* installation ceremony that he looked forward to scandalizing academics by invoking the name of Jesus. Perhaps most of all, he was a teacher's scholar, a man who took as much joy in uncovering the meaning of the Trinity for freshmen as he did in uncovering a new wrinkle in Augustine's homiletics.

Bill served as my departmental mentor in Theology during my first three years at Creighton. I remain indebted to Bill for helping to shape my early research trajectory. He helped me to stay calm amidst the self-inflicted pressures of a tenure-track job. His advice to me was disarmingly simple. "Just do your job well, and tenure will take care of itself." Bill was the single most influential voice in my decision to publish my first book on Rwanda with Oxford University Press. In fact, without Bill's encouragement I never would have had the courage to even submit a proposal to OUP. He remained a trusted sounding board on

subsequent research projects, including the early envisioning of a project on Catholic social reconciliation that Creighton hosted in 2017.

Bill also mentored me through his teaching. Midway through my first year, I was languishing in the doldrums, unsure of how to connect introductory theology to an undergraduate audience. The symbol of this struggle was Trinitarian doctrine – simultaneously the most important and most complicated doctrine in the Christian tradition. So I asked Bill if I could watch his freshman class on Nicaea. I was in for a treat. Bill seemed to dance around the room, singing Arian songs before asking an unsuspecting freshman, “Matt, was there a time when Matt was not?”

“Well, Fr. Harmless, yes there was . . . before I was born.”

“So there was a when when Matt was not?”

“Yes Father.”

“So there was a time when Matt did not exist, even in the mind of his parents?”

“Umm, I guess so Father.”

“So was there also a when Jesus Christ the Logos was not? Was he born into existence like Matt?”

“No, that doesn’t make sense Father.”

“Why not?”

Five minutes later, pens and pencils scribbling furiously, Bill’s first-year theology students were beginning to wrap their heads around what was at stake in the fourth-century Nicene/Arian debates. And I had learned that Bill Harmless was as good a teacher as he was a scholar.

But as much as I learned from Bill in research and teaching, my most memorable conversations with him often had little to do with academics. That first conversation in *Homer’s* record shop revealed our mutual love for indie music; I still cannot listen to Deerhunter’s *Haleyon Digest* or War on Drugs’ *Lost in The Dream* without thinking of Bill. Bill and I also shared a love of sports. I fondly remember watching Game 1 of the 2011 World Series and the 2014 World Cup semifinals with him at the Jesuit residence. As an Africanist myself, I loved hearing Bill’s stories from his Peace Corps days in Mali. Bill always struck me as not just a great academic but a well-rounded and refreshingly-grounded Renaissance man.

Like many, I was shocked by the sudden nature of Bill’s death in October 2014 at the relatively young age of 61. For several days I had trouble teaching and sleeping. My wife Becky – who thoroughly enjoyed Bill’s gift for gab at our home and elsewhere – helped me to put things in perspective. “We will all miss Bill. But his death was in keeping with his life. Out walking in downtown Omaha, thinking through writing projects, listening to music, at the peak of his intellectual abilities. There was no decline with Bill. And that is a gift.” When I think of Bill today, it is that word “gift” that echoes. I only spent a few years learning from him, but it was all gift.