

however much Augustine owes to the spirit of his own time, that is to say to the spirit of the dying ancient world, he is in the essentials of his mind a modern man.¹¹ The scenes of his early life stand out like pictures; and his mother lives before our mind's eye as if we had seen her in the flesh. His whole existence, so marvellously directed towards God, establishes decisively the triumph of grace. 'And behold Thou wert within me while I made search for Thee without: unsightly that I was, I rushed headlong upon those beautiful things Thou hast made. Thou indeed wert with me, but I was not with Thee: those things which, unless they were in Thee, should not be at all, kept me far from Thee. Thou didst call and cry unto me; Thou didst even break open my deafness: discovering Thy beams and shining upon me, Thou didst chase away my blindness: Thy fragrance blew upon me, I drew my breath, and now I pant after Thee; I tasted Thee and now do hunger and thirst for Thee. Thou didst touch me, and I burned to enjoy Thy peace.'¹²

From beginning to end the *Confessions* are primarily a song of praise and thanksgiving to the God who did everything to capture a heart which knew no rest till it rested in Him.

¹¹ Karl Adam, *St Augustine: the Odyssey of his Soul*, p. 3.

¹² *Confess.* x, 27.

ST AUGUSTINE AS A PREACHER

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THERE is to my mind little doubt that St Augustine regarded preaching as the most important of a bishop's duties. It is the pastoral work *par excellence*, to feed the flock, to break the bread of the Word to the hungry. It is the bishop's proper mode of almsgiving, of investing the talent which the Lord has given to him. 'To lead a carefree life of leisure', says Augustine, 'little force would be needed to make me do that. There could be nothing more enjoyable than rummaging about in the divine treasure chest, with no one to plague me. While preaching, arguing, rebuking, building God's house, having to manage for every one, who wouldn't shrink from such a heavy burden? But the gospel scares me'¹—namely, the parable of the

¹ *Sed terret me Evangelium*, S. 339.

slothful servant. He also preached on that text, once when 'the lords my brethren and fellow-bishops have been good enough to visit us and encourage us by their presence; and yet for some reason or other they refuse to give tired me a helping hand, and you a sermon when I ask them'.² A short sermon, and very pointed. Poor blushing bishops in the apse!

Besides preaching tirelessly himself, he also provided in the *De Doctrina Christiana* what really seems to be a manual on preaching for the clergy. Most of this work, it is true, is concerned with how to interpret Scripture; but this means, for Augustine, how to acquire the matter for your sermons. The only sort of preaching he could conceive of was preaching the truth of God which is given us in the Scriptures. True, a man might get along well enough without them, if he is far advanced in that charity which is their message. But to one who has pretensions to lead and instruct others in the way of truth and charity, the Scriptures are indispensable. God, as Augustine quaintly remarks at the beginning of a sermon, only likes the sound of his own voice. He will only be pleased with what we have to say, if we let him speak through us.³

First, then, in the *Doctrina Christiana*, he discusses the 'way of finding out what we have to understand', and then, in the last book only, 'the way of imparting to others what we have understood'. In Book I he gives us in fact a summary of Christian teaching; the things that really matter, God, Christ, the Church; and how to attain them by the right use of everything else, Faith, Hope, and Charity.⁴ That in effect is what Scripture amounts to; and that in effect is what his own sermons amount to. His favourite topics seem to have been on the one hand God, the possession of him in eternal life, the mystery of the divine Persons; and on the other hand the Church. It was about the Church in fact that he was at odds with the Donatists. So he stresses its undivided unity, which is the unity of the body of Christ, the unity preserved by charity; and its universal extent in fulfilment of prophecy; nothing less than the whole world could

² S. 94.

³ In Ps. 99.

⁴ Augustine constructs the book on two distinctions; the first between things and signs which represent things; the second between things to be enjoyed, which make us happy, i.e. the things that really matter, and things to be used in order to attain the things we should enjoy. It is a bad mistake to enjoy the second things for their own sake, and a worse one to use the first things in order to get the others.

have been bought with so infinite a price as Christ's blood;⁵ and lastly he always harps on the mixed character of the Church militant; it is the threshing-floor piled high with both grain and chaff, the field full of wheat and cockle, and the grain must patiently bear with the chaff, and the chaff must take the opportunity of turning into grain while there is still time, before the day of judgment and separation comes.

The Church is the body of Christ, it is Christ bringing his members to the good things of the land of the living by embodying them in himself, the new man. Perhaps no text is more often quoted by Augustine than 'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?'. It shows the solidarity, the identity that there is between Christ and Christians. He said 'Me', not 'My members', though he was in heaven, untouched by Saul's fury. Christ is our physician healing our blindness with the eye-salve of his humanity. He is our mother even, or rather our mother's milk, for the Word was made flesh so that the solid food of angels might be made milk for babes.⁶ Christ by his incarnation and passion is the master of humility. It is in terms of the redemption, and of the humility which was able to achieve it, and the humility which is needed to receive it, that Augustine waged his war on the Pelagians over the question of grace.

What he says about charity could be the subject of volumes. Charity alone makes the Christian life possible. 'Narrow is the way, etc.'; yes, says Augustine, but it is wide for the lover.⁷ For him the two cardinal virtues and the two cardinal vices are Love and Fear. I don't want you to stop loving, he says; far from it, love as hard as ever you can; but love the right things. Love of the right things is called Charity, of the wrong things Cupidity. He never tires of urging a genuine practical charity, manifest in the works of mercy. 'Don't forget the poor. You won't lose what you give them; what you lose in fact is what you *don't* put in the plate. I see there's much less today than you usually give. Shake off your slackness. Let me be a beggar for beggars.'⁸

⁵ cf. in Ps. 21, preached on a Good Friday.

⁶ cf. S. 185, and the following sermons. Also our Lord's longing for Jerusalem as a hen for her chicks, which is called an affection '*maternae infirmitatis, non amissae majestatis*'. (In Ps. 58.)²

⁷ In Ps. 30, S. 1.

⁸ *Ego sim mendicus mendicorum, ut vos numeremini in numero filiorum.* The word I translate 'plate' is '*quadriga*', lit. 'chariot', which I assume to have been the popular name for some sort of collecting box. S. 66.

The most valuable way of giving is forgiving; even the poor can do this; and they are not allowed to delude themselves by thinking that mere poverty will get them to heaven. They are warned against envying the rich. Charity to be sincere must not be cupboard love. We must love God with a 'straight heart', not a crooked one, a heart ruled by his will, ready to say with Job: 'The Lord has given, the Lord has taken away, blessed be the name of the Lord'.⁹ But it is quite impossible to convey the fulness, the balance, and the shrewdness of his teaching on any of these topics.

It is all taken from Scripture and given in terms of Scripture. These are the real things of which Scripture contains the signs. In Books II and III, *Doctrina Christiana*, he deals with the interpretation of these signs. His chief interest is in the spiritual or mystical meaning of Scripture, and he gives a number of rules by which we may bring to light the mysteries—or, as he often calls them, the sacraments—which are hidden under the veil of the letter. 'Certainly', he says, 'there is nothing we draw out of these obscurities, which cannot be found put quite plainly somewhere else.' But, to put it briefly, it's so much more fun¹⁰ to find the truth wrapped up in symbols; and the Holy Ghost has magnificently arranged the Scriptures for the benefit of all, with plain passages for the famished, and obscure ones for the fastidious.

His ingenuity in manipulating the signs is extraordinary, and to the modern mind probably suspect. Numbers had a peculiar fascination for him, and called forth all his skill. Why did Christ say we must forgive not 7 times but 77 times? A great mystery, a wonderful sacrament! St Luke counts 77 generations from Adam the original sinner to Christ the redeemer, so that 77 signifies as it were the totality of sin. Again 77 is 7×11 , and 11, being one over the ten commandments, signifies the fulness of transgression. There is nothing, in other words, too bad to forgive.

Or take his exegesis¹¹ of the 153 fishes of John 21. They represent the number of the blessed after the last day. For 153 is the triangle of 17; i.e. $153 = 17 + 16 + 15 \dots + 1$. But $17 = 7 + 10$, and

⁹ In Ps. 31.

¹⁰ *nescio quomodo suavius, Doct. Christ. II, 6.*

¹¹ S. 83.

signifies therefore those who fulfil the commandments by the grace of the Holy Ghost. 153 therefore stands for the grand total of these elect.¹² Charming but unconvincing, says the reader. But a modern scholar quite independently of Augustine, and approaching the matter from a different angle altogether, also maintains that St John meant the number to be a mystical measurement of the elect, because it is the triangle of 17, and 17 is the diagonal of the four-square heavenly city, whose sides have the measurement of 12. (A. Farrer, *Rebirth of Images*, p. 254.) So perhaps Augustine is truer to the mind of the sacred writers than we are.

In Book IV, *Doctrina Christiana*, he goes on to deal with the actual business of preaching. Rhetorical art is useful, he says, for the 'ecclesiastical man' (after all, why should the truth be unarmed?) but not essential. The best way to become eloquent, in any case, is not to learn the rules but to read and listen to the masters of the art. Such examples can be found both in ecclesiastical authors and in the sacred writings themselves. What is essential in a preacher is clarity. The obscurity of the Scriptures is the one thing he must not imitate. It is all the more necessary to be easily understood, because the audience cannot ask the preacher questions. However, the 'people eager for knowledge'¹³ have ways of showing by their movements when they understand you, and so you must go on putting what you have to say in a variety of ways, until they show unmistakably that they have understood. This of course is impossible if you come with a sermon learnt by heart. Augustine would have his preacher speak *ex tempore*—think not how or what you will speak—armed only with his own and his congregation's prayers, keeping his mind open to the inspirations of the moment. But this of course means sacrificing the more elaborate artifices of oratory.

It is clear that this was his own almost invariable practice. One day he had prepared a short psalm to expound to the people, but the lector got flustered at the last moment, and sang a

12 In Ps. 49, Ss. 248–51. N.B. this passage from S. 249, typical of his easy touch. 'When you add these seven (gifts) to ten (law), it makes ten. What did I say? How absurd! Seven and ten make ten, as though I had forgotten how to count! Of course I should have said seven and ten make seventeen, as everyone knows. Why, these boys here started laughing at me when I said seven and ten make ten. Yet I'll say it again without blushing. When you see why, you won't find fault with my counting, but you will like my method of reckoning. When you add seven to ten, it makes ten; when you add the Holy Ghost to the Law, the Law is kept, you make ten.'

13 *cognoscendi avida multitudo*; c. 10. Augustine appreciated his audience.

different one (138); 'so I prefer, says Augustine, to follow God's will in the lector's mistake, rather than my own in my original purpose'. He freed himself to a quite remarkable extent from the rhetorical habits that would have been natural in an ex-professor of rhetoric. As it so happens we have two sermons which, from casual remarks he makes in them, must have been almost his maiden efforts. So we can see how his style developed in the direction of simplicity, gaining in vividness and freedom what it lost in elegance.¹⁴

One of the chief delights of St Augustine's sermons is the quality of imagination they reveal, often whimsical, but always concrete and always accurate. His nice use of images is especially evident when he is expounding the Trinity, or the union of natures in Christ. He combines subtlety and homeliness. 'When someone tears your cloak', he says, 'you cry "You've torn me into ribbons",¹⁵ though it is not you, but your cloak that's been torn. In the same way we say the Son of God was crucified and buried, though he suffered only as man, and only his body was buried.'

He is quite incapable of a colourless metaphor. Explaining how Christ is the foundation of the Church, he takes what might so easily be the husk of an image, and makes us think of real foundations on which real houses of bricks and mortar are built—the difference being that in this case the foundation is on top of the house instead of underneath it, because this house, being built of charity and holy desires, 'weighs' upwards.¹⁶ He explains the significance of the word 'Jubilate' from the yodels and wordless tra-la-las of profane ditties and harvesting songs, which the singers break out into from a 'super-abundance of joy'.¹⁷ 'To

14 Compare these two passages, which I have left untranslated to preserve the quality of the style.

S. 216, ad Competentes (early).
Infantia vestra innocentia erit, pueritia reverentia, adolescentia patientia, juventus virtus, senium meritum, senectus nihil aliud quam canus sapiensque intellectus. Per hos articulos vel gradus aetatis non tu evolveris, sed permanens innovaris. Non enim ut decedat prior secunda succedet, aut tertiae ortus secundae erit interitus, aut quarta jam nascitur ut tertia moriatur; non quinta quartae invidet ut maneat, nec quintam sexta sepeliet.

in Ps. 127 (later).
Optas ut crescant filii, ut accedat aetas. Sed vide quia veniente pueritia moritur infantia, veniente adolescentia moritur pueritia, veniente juventute moritur adolescentia, veniente senectute moritur juventus, veniente morte moritur omnis aetas. . . . Nati pueri tamquam hoc dicunt parentibus 'Eja, cogitate ire hinc, agamus et nos mimum nostrum'. Mimus est generis humani tota vita tentationis.

The other undoubtedly early sermon is S. 214.

15 *Fila me fecisti!* S. 213.

16 in Ps. 29.

17 in Ps. 99.

make shipwreck of the faith': what a cliché it can be! Augustine makes it fresh, and shows us the man who trusts to his own virtue too much and ignores grace, as a helmsman of superb skill managing his craft in heavy seas, holding it steadily to its course—but a course which is laid straight on the rocks and not on the harbour mouth.¹⁸

He was obviously quite at home in the pulpit, and one gets the impression that normally he enjoyed it immensely. He wasn't just making speeches, but talking of what he had most at heart to his own people, and it is clear that he loved them and they loved him. Like everyone who is doing something which he likes and is good at, he often tended to go on too long. He frequently apologizes for it, and blames the people for their excessive eagerness. 'I have no idea how long I have been speaking', he says after one sermon (actually just over an hour). 'But now the psalm is finished, and I gather from this fug¹⁹ in here that I have given you a long sermon. I can't cope with your keenness. You are too violent altogether. If only this violence of yours can carry off the kingdom of heaven!' He succeeded as it were in making his people take a part in his preaching. He would carry on conversations in the pulpit (taking both sides himself, of course), e.g. with a rich man whom he was urging to be generous to the poor, or with a poor man who envied the rich—'listen to me now, Mr Poorman';²⁰ or with a man who didn't see much wrong in keeping a concubine, and was in no hurry to mend his ways—'When are you going to turn over a new leaf? Tomorrow, you say. But look, whenever you say "Tomorrow" (cras, cras) you turn into a crow. Look. I'm telling you, when you start croaking like a crow, you're almost done for. That crow you copy was the bird which left the ark and didn't come back.'²¹ And then after one of these impromptu interludes eloquence will out, and there comes a splendid piece of oratory, or just a memorable little rhyming phrase or jingle,²² and you can almost hear the murmur of pleasure and admiration from the faithful.

¹⁸ in Ps. 31.

¹⁹ ab isto odore; in Ps. 72.

²⁰ Audi ergo me de hoc quod proposuisti, domne pauper. S. 14.

²¹ S. 224.

²² e.g. Breviter dico, saeculi laetitia est impunita nequitia S. 171. Piscis assus Christus est passus, In Jn. 123. Or on Pelagian pride; Quid dicitis, non assertores sed praecipitatores liberi arbitrii, ex alto elationis, per inania praesumptionis, in profunda submersionis? In Jn. 81.

Yet for all this easy familiarity, St Augustine never forgot his pulpit manners. He applies the honorific titles that were then in vogue to his congregation, and calls them 'Your Holiness', and 'Your Charity'. After all they were the holy people of God, and their clergy, as he reminds them sometimes, were not automatically more holy than they. 'Don't imagine that the cockle never climbs into the apse (where the bishops sat among the priests). I tell you there is wheat and there is cockle in the apses too.'²³ And on the Our Father to catechumens, 'We all have to say, Forgive us our debts. What, I can see you thinking, even you holy bishops? Have you got debts that need forgiving? Yes, we too. Even if the boat isn't wrecked (by grievous sin), its bilges still need pumping regularly, or it will sink.'²⁴

Let us end where we began, with Augustine's sermon on his own job. It is a very short one, only ten to fifteen minutes. Here are a few brief extracts.

'This day, my brothers, is a warning to me to think carefully about the burden I have to carry. I have to think about it night and day, of course, but somehow this anniversary rubs it in, so that I can't get it out of my mind at all. And as the years go by, the sharper such thoughts become, when I wonder what sort of account I will be able to give of you to the Lord our God. . . . So lighten my burden for me, brothers, lighten my load and help me to carry it. Lead good lives. Christmas is coming, we have our poor people to feed, humanity must be shown to them. These words are the fare which I provide for you. I haven't enough to feed everyone with visible bread. . . . I feed you with what I am fed on. I am a servant, not the master of the house. I set before you what I live on myself from the Lord's storehouse, from the table of the master who, when he was rich, became poor for our sakes. . . . So this is how I invest my talent; if anyone was bad yesterday, let him be good today. He was bad yesterday, and he's not dead yet; if he had died, and been bad, he would have gone where there's no coming back from. But he's still alive. Take advantage of it, then. Why add a bad today to a bad yesterday? You want a long life; don't you want a good one? Who can put up with even a long and bad dinner? Do you want a house? I refuse to believe that you want a bad one. Or a wife? Yes and

²³ S. 73.

²⁴ S. 56.

a good one, too, of course. You don't like a bad pair of boots, why put up with a bad life? As though a bad pair of boots hurt more than a bad life. When your boots pinch, you sit down and take them off, and throw them away, or mend them or exchange them, so as not ruin your toe. But a bad life ruins your soul. Ah, but I see where you get taken in. A boot with a nail in it is nasty, but a life of vice is nice. Yes, but what is nice at the time, is all the nastier afterwards, and what is nasty, but good for you, at the time, makes you happy afterwards for ever with endless pleasure and joy unending; as it is written, "Who sows in tears shall reap in joy", and "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted".

ST AUGUSTINE AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

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ABOUT two years before his actual conversion St Augustine evinced the first signs of the kind of life he would embrace. He had reached the stage when it was no longer a matter of being sure of God but of 'how to become more steadfast in God.'¹

He hoped to be directed by Simplicianus as to which should be the best course for one in his case to walk in the way of God. He witnessed the church full of faithful and one went this way and one went that, and he felt unhappy that although he had renounced all desire of honour and gain because of the attraction he felt for the 'sweetness of God and the beauty of his house which he loved', there yet remained entanglements which he found it hard to sever.

Augustine was aided in the last stages towards his conversion by the striking accounts he heard of the numbers of those who devoted themselves to the monastic life. Pontitianus, his fellow countryman, a high official of the Milanese court, related to him the history of the Egyptian monk, St Antony, who on reading in St Matthew (19, 21): 'Go, sell what thou hast and give to the

¹ *Confess.*, viii, 1.