

## AUGUSTINE AND THE VISION OF GOD

AUGUSTINE AND THE VISION OF GOD:  
THE EVOLUTION OF AUGUSTINE'S CONCEPTION OF  
THE ATTAINMENT OF THE VISION OF GOD IN  
*DE QUANTITATE ANIMAE, CONFESIONES, AND DE TRINITATE*

BY  
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### **Abstract**

Throughout his career Augustine wrote often about the attainment of the vision of God, in which God would be seen face-to-face without the need of signs and symbols. He understood this vision to be the ultimate goal of Christianity, for in this contemplation of the divine believers attain true happiness through the enjoyment of God. Given the centrality of the vision of God in Augustine's writings, one would expect the secondary literature to be replete with references to this facet of his thought. However, this is not the case. While minor studies have been produced on the vision of God and Augustine, no major study exists. This thesis is an attempt to address, at least in some measure, this scholarly lacuna.

In this thesis I attempt to examine Augustine's conception of the attainment of the vision of God as formulated at different points of his career in order to analyse the evolution of his thought. To accomplish this task I chose three principal writings from his corpus in which the vision of God plays an especially prominent role, each of which provides a window into the mindset of Augustine at a particular period of his life; they are *De Quantitate Animae* (*The Greatness of the Soul*), written c. 387; *Confessiones*, completed between 397 and 401; and *De Trinitate* (*On the Trinity*), completed c. 420.

Through an analysis of Augustine's conception of the vision of God in each of these writings, I argue that his understanding of the means by which the vision is attained evolves as his career progresses. For example, in *De Quantitate Animae* Augustine posits that the soul can attain the vision of God in this life through a Plotinian-style interior withdrawal, and while he suggests that the church and the incarnate Son of God play a role in the soul's ascent to God, precisely what role they play is ambiguously formulated. Later writings, however, indicate that Augustine's conception of the vision of God evolved and I argue that the development of Augustine's conception of the attainment of the vision of God is a development which sees him moving steadily away from a positive understanding of human potentiality toward a conception of the drastic consequences of human fallenness which is directly related to wrongly-ordered love, and away from an emphasis on interiority as a means of purification and toward an understanding of God as purifier in and through the Holy Spirit, whereby the individual is purified through the collective purification of the community manifesting the love that is the Holy Spirit. A more pronounced and nuanced conception of the role of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and of the community of the church in the attainment of the vision of God eschatologically thus characterises the evolution of Augustine's conception of humanity's ascent to the divine. This development also finds Augustine placing progressively less emphasis on the attainment of the vision of God in this life.

### Acknowledgements

In *Confessiones* Augustine has this to say about his experience of friendship at one particular part of his life:

There were other things which occupied my mind in the company of my friends: to make conversation, to share a joke, to perform mutual acts of kindness, to read together well-written books, to share in trifling and in serious matters, to disagree though without animosity – just as a person debates with himself – and in the very rarity of disagreement to find the salt of normal harmony, to teach each other something or to learn from one another, to long with impatience for those absent, to welcome them with gladness on their arrival. These and other signs come from the heart of those who love and are loved and are expressed through the mouth, through the tongue, through the eyes, and a thousand gestures of delight, acting as fuel to set our minds on fire and out of many to forge unity.<sup>1</sup>

I have been fortunate, not only in the last two years, but in the whole of my life to experience such friendship, and I want to take this opportunity to give thanks to those who have been most influential in the composition of this thesis. Some of these people provided advice and guidance, others provided a dissenting voice to my ideas (“though without animosity”), others engaged me in active conversation and debate, while others simply listened to me when I was frustrated or anxious. So in no particular order, allow me to list some of the people without whom the composition of this thesis would have been far more difficult than it was.

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<sup>1</sup> *Conf.*, IV.8.13.

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**Abbreviations**

**Works of Augustine**

<i>Confessiones</i>	<i>Conf.</i>	<i>Confessions</i>
<i>Contra Academicos</i>	<i>CA</i>	<i>Against the Sceptics</i>
<i>De Beata Via</i>	<i>DBV</i>	<i>The Happy Life</i>
<i>De Civitate Dei</i>	<i>CD</i>	<i>The City of God</i>
<i>De Ordine</i>	<i>DeOrd.</i>	<i>On Order</i>
<i>De Quantitate Animae</i>	<i>QuAn.</i>	<i>Greatness of the Soul</i>
<i>De Spiritu et Littera</i>	<i>SL</i>	<i>The Spirit and the Letter</i>
<i>De Trinitate</i>	<i>DeTrin.</i>	<i>The Trinity</i>
<i>De Vera Religione</i>	<i>DVR</i>	<i>True Religion</i>
<i>Epistulae</i>	<i>Ep.</i>	<i>Letter(s)</i>
<i>Retractationes</i>	<i>Retr.</i>	<i>Reconsiderations/Retractions</i>
<i>Soliloquia</i>	<i>Solil.</i>	<i>Soliloquies</i>

**Works of Plotinus**

<i>The Enneads</i>	<i>Enn.</i>
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**Works of Porphyry**

<i>On the Life and Work of Plotinus and the Arrangement of his Work</i>	<i>ViPl.</i>
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**Works of Plato**

<i>Republic</i>	<i>Rep.</i>
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All quotations from the Bible, unless otherwise noted, will be from the New Revised Standard Version (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).



### **Introduction: The Importance of the Vision of God in Augustine's Thought**

In an early post-conversion writing entitled *Soliloquia*, in which Augustine wrote a dialogue between himself and personified Reason, the latter questions Augustine as to what it is that he wants to know above all other things. His answer is brief but significant:

Augustine: I want to know God and the soul.  
Reason: Nothing more?  
Augustine: Nothing at all.<sup>1</sup>

Later in the same dialogue the reader is informed that to know God is to understand him, and to understand him is to see him.<sup>2</sup> “I believe that the soul’s proper abode,” he writes in an early treatise entitled *De Quantitate Animae*, “and its homeland, is God Himself by whom it has been created.”<sup>3</sup> To arrive at this homeland, Augustine describes later in the treatise, the soul must be renewed and purified so as to be “like to God.”<sup>4</sup> And desiring nothing but truth, the soul is led to the contemplation of truth whereby God is seen face to face. Perfect love and understanding result from this vision, for it is in the vision that the soul breaks free of all that binds it to created things and is united with its creator.

It is this vision of God that Augustine, throughout his career, consistently understood to be the ultimate goal of the soul. “I will press on with determination in this quest,” he writes in his exposition on Psalm 26, “for it is not any worthless thing I look for, Lord, but your countenance only, that I may love you freely. Nothing more precious than that can I find.”<sup>5</sup> The goal of the Christian life, Augustine explains in another exposition of this same psalm, is expressed in the psalmist’s yearning “to contemplate the

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<sup>1</sup> *Solil.*, 1.7. The English translation is from *Soliloquies and Immortality of the Soul*, Gerald Watson, translator (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, I.12-13.

<sup>3</sup> *QuAn.*, I.2. The English translation used throughout this thesis, unless otherwise noted, is from *The Greatness of the Soul*, Joseph M. Colleran, translator (Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1950).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.4.

<sup>5</sup> *Exposition 1 of Psalm 26*. The English translation is from *Expositions on the Psalms: 1-32*, Maria Boulding, translator (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 2000).

Lord's delight." For through contemplation of God, wherein there is "no misfortune to threaten me as I do so, no temptation to distract me, no one's power to sweep me away, no enemy to suffer from as I contemplate him," the believer will enjoy "that bliss to the full with no worries, the bliss that is the Lord my God himself."<sup>6</sup> Similar sentiments regarding the vision of God as the soteriological goal of the Christian life are expressed throughout his corpus. For instance, in *De Civitate Dei* Augustine writes: "[N]o Christian doubts that it is with those eyes of the heart that he will see God; for he faithfully accepts what our God and Master says: 'Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.'"<sup>7</sup> As well, after quoting 1 Corinthians 13.12 in *De Trinitate* – "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face" – Augustine writes that it is this "contemplation [that] is promised us as the end of all activities and the eternal perfection of all joys."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps Robert J. O'Connell described the centrality of the vision of God in Augustine's thought best in the following words:

If there is one constant running through all of Augustine's thinking, not only in this period but throughout his career, it is his preoccupation with the question of happiness. From the *De Beata Vita* to the *De Civitate Dei*, this is always the focal question. But the answer is equally uniform: what makes man happy is the possession of God, a possession achieved by way of vision. Christianity's answer to human experience consists, for him, first and foremost in its assurance that man can truly look forward with hope to the vision that is [the] object of the soul's consubstantial desire.<sup>9</sup>

Given the centrality of the vision of God in Augustine's writings, one would expect the secondary literature to be replete with references to this facet of his thought. However, this is not the case. While scholars such as Dom Cuthbert Butler, Andrew Louth, Roland Teske, and Frederick Van Fleteren have produced important minor studies

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<sup>6</sup> *Exposition 2 of Psalm 26*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> CD XXII.29. The English translation used throughout this thesis is *The City of God against the Pagans*, R.W. Dyson, translator (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> *De Trin.*, I.17. The English translation used throughout this thesis is *The Trinity*, Edmund Hill, translator (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> *St. Augustine's Early Theory of Man, A.D. 386-391* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968), 205. Cf. Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 232.

on Augustine and the vision of God,<sup>10</sup> to my knowledge, no major study exists. This thesis is an attempt to address, at least in some measure, this scholarly lacuna.

In what follows I will examine Augustine's conception of the vision of God as it was formulated at different points of his career. As already mentioned, Augustine consistently posits the vision to be the ultimate goal of the Christian life, and this emphasis does not vary throughout his career. However, his conception of the means by which the vision is attained does vary as his life progresses, and in this thesis I will endeavour to describe and analyze the manner in which Augustine's conception of the attainment of the vision of God evolved over time. In order to accomplish this task I have chosen three principal writings from his corpus to examine, each of which provides a window into the mindset of Augustine at a particular period of his life; they are *De Quantitate Animae* (*The Greatness/Quantity of the Soul*), written c. 387; *Confessiones*, completed between 397 and 401; and *De Trinitate* (*On the Trinity*), completed c. 420. In each of these works the vision of God plays a prominent role for in each Augustine discusses how the vision is to be attained by fallen humanity, and whether or not such a vision can be realised in this life.

The first chapter of my thesis will comprise an examination of chapter thirty-three of *De Quantitate Animae*, written approximately one year after his conversion to Christianity. Of all his early post-conversion writings, *De Quantitate Animae* contains the most sustained examination of the attainment of the vision of God. Written in the form of a dialogue, Augustine strives in this work to prove how the soul can be

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Dom Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism: The Teaching of SS. Augustine, Gregory and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life*. (London: Constable Publishers, 1951); Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981); Roland J. Teske, "St. Augustine and the Vision of God," *Collectanea Augustiniana – Augustine: Mystic and Mystagogue*, Joseph Reino, Joseph C. Schnaubelt, and Frederick Van Fleteren, eds. (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 287-308; Frederick Van Fleteren, "The Ascent of the Soul in the Augustinian Tradition," *Paradigms in Medieval Thought Applications in Medieval Disciplines: A Symposium* (Queenston, Ontario: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987), 93-110 and "Augustine and the Possibility of the Vision of God in this Life," *Studies in Medieval Culture XI*, Thomas H. Seiler and John R. Sommerfeldt, eds. (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 1977), 9-16.

ontologically superior to any corporeal thing despite lacking corporeal quantity. The climax of this discussion is found in chapter thirty-three in which he describes seven levels of the soul's ascent to God. My examination of Augustine's early conception of the vision of God will comprise a detailed analysis of these seven levels. The first six levels contain Augustine's reflections on the means by which the soul is to attain the vision of God in this life, and I shall analyze the dynamics of the process of interior withdrawal promulgated therein. I will argue that Augustine's conception of interiority reflects the influence of Neoplatonic thinking at this early stage of his post-conversion career. However, while I shall highlight the continuities between Augustine's emphasis on interiority and that which we find in the writings of Plotinus, I shall also highlight the ways in which the former clearly diverges from the latter, particularly with regards to Augustine's stress on the necessity of divine assistance. This emphasis on divine assistance receives concrete definition in Augustine's description of the seventh level of the soul's ascent in which he briefly refers to the importance of the incarnate Son and the church in this ascent. These references to the church and to the incarnation in *De Quantitate Animae* 33 are the only times either of these are mentioned in the treatise, and the significance of the introduction of these specifically Christian ideas, which are ambiguously formulated in this treatise, will be analyzed in detail below.

My second chapter will comprise an examination of Augustine's conception of the attainment of the vision as expressed in *Confessiones*, completed roughly ten years after the composition of *De Quantitate Animae*. Two books in particular will be the focus of my analysis; books VII and IX. Within these two books Augustine describes the visions he experienced in Milan and Ostia respectively; the first occurring prior to his conversion to Christianity, and the second occurring with his mother after his conversion and baptism. In my analysis of these two accounts, I will argue that Augustine here emphasizes the weakness of the soul, weakness caused by inordinate love, to a degree not

found in *De Quantitate Animae*. This emphasis on the soul's weakness is coupled with a more pronounced and defined conception of the role the church and the incarnate Son play in the attainment of the vision of God than we find in *De Quantitate Animae*, and this development in Augustine's understanding of the vision will be examined in detail. Furthermore, the fact that Augustine in *Confessiones* places the attainment of the vision of God in an eschatological framework, which he did not do in *De Quantitate Animae*, will be analyzed.

In the third, and final, chapter, I will focus on *De Trinitate*, particularly books XIV and XV. Within both of these books Augustine posits an understanding of the attainment of the vision of God that emphasizes both the role of the Holy Spirit in the purification of humanity and the practical manifestation of this purifying work in the church. Augustine argues that the Holy Spirit is the love eternally shared between the Father and the Son, and as the love that is both from God and is God, the Holy Spirit purifies believers by reordering the disordered love that Augustine understands to be at the heart of the human dilemma. It is through the Spirit that believers are empowered to love God and neighbour, and it is through him that believers are gradually purified of that which has distorted humanity. I will argue that Augustine understands the practical manifestation of this purifying work of the Spirit to take place within the context of the ecclesiastical community in which, through the Spirit, love is given and received in a manner that imitates the love eternally and selflessly shared between the Father and the Son. As shall be demonstrated below, this is a much more fully developed conception of the attainment of the vision of God in relation to the Holy Spirit and the church than we find in either *De Quantitate Animae* or *Confessiones*, and it will be these pneumatological and ecclesiological emphases as formulated by Augustine in *De Trinitate* which will be the focus of my third chapter.

My thesis will therefore cover the development of Augustine's conception of the way in which the vision is attained as expressed over a period covering approximately forty years of his life. It is a development, I shall argue, that is characterized by greater emphasis upon the weakness of the soul, the necessity of humility, the importance of the incarnate Word as the mediator between God and humanity, the role of the Spirit in reordering the disordered love of humanity, and correspondingly by a more fully expressed conception of the church as the context in which the purification of the believer takes place as one gradually learns to love God and neighbour by the power of the Spirit. The development of these ideas is also coupled with a movement away from an understanding that the vision of God can be fully experienced in this life, and as the following analysis will show, it will be the eschatological fulfillment of the vision of God that Augustine will emphasize to a greater extent as his career progresses. It is to an analysis of Augustine's early conception of the vision of God, as portrayed in *De Quantitate Animae* 33, that I now turn.

**Chapter 1**  
**De Quantitate Animae and Augustine's Early Conception**  
**of the Attainment of the Vision of God**

Furthermore, in the contemplation of truth, no matter what degree of contemplation you reach, the delight is so great, there is such purity, such innocence, a conviction of all things that is so absolute, that one could think he really knew nothing when aforetime he fancied he had knowledge. And that the souls may not be impeded from giving full allegiance to the fullness of truth, death – meaning complete escape and acquittal from this body – which previously was feared, is now desired as the greatest boon.<sup>1</sup>

**Introduction**

Shortly after his dramatic conversion to Christianity in 386 – recounted in book VIII of *Confessiones* – Augustine resigned his post as a teacher of rhetoric in Milan and retreated to a country house at Cassiciacum with his friends and relations in order to cultivate the leisure necessary for the development of theological and philosophical speculation. The writings known as the Cassiciacum dialogues originate from this period of retreat. After approximately six months, Augustine returned to Milan to be baptized by Ambrose on Holy Saturday 387. The following autumn witnessed Augustine's voyage to Ostia where his mother, Monica, died – this event will be referred to in greater detail in the next chapter – and shortly after her death, he traveled to Rome to await a ship that could take him and his companions back to Africa where they intended to live as monastics.

It was during this sojourn in Rome that Augustine composed *De Quantitate Animae* (*On the Greatness of the Soul*), a treatise written in the form of a dialogue between himself and Evodius who was among those waiting in Rome with Augustine.<sup>2</sup> Born in Thagaste, which was also Augustine's birthplace, Evodius spent his youth as a soldier before taking up a position as a civil servant. Upon his conversion to Christianity,

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<sup>1</sup> *QuAn.*, 33.76.

<sup>2</sup> In letters exchanged between Evodius, then bishop of Uzalis, and Augustine in 414-415, we are informed that *De Quantitate Animae* was based upon actual dialogue between the two men while they were in Rome in the autumn of 387. See especially *Ep.* 162.

he left his government post to devote himself more fully to the service of God. An early acquaintance of Augustine, Evodius was a member of the Cassiciacum community, and was thus privy to the theological and philosophical dialogues conducted there. After Augustine's baptism in Milan, Evodius decided to "live together in the devout life" with Augustine in Africa,<sup>3</sup> and was thus with him in Ostia where Augustine experienced a mystical vision with his mother which is described in book IX of *Confessiones*. Monica died shortly after this experience, and we are told in *Confessiones* that Evodius was a great source of comfort to Augustine and his son Adeodatus after Monica's passing.<sup>4</sup> It is after this event that Augustine and Evodius conducted the dialogue upon which *De Quantitate Animae* is based.

The dialogue of *De Quantitate Animae* begins with six questions posed by Evodius regarding the soul:

Where does the soul come from?  
What sort of thing is it?  
How great is it?  
Why was it united with the body?  
What results from its union with the body?  
What results from its separation?<sup>5</sup>

These are substantial and important questions. However, as the title *De Quantitate Animae* suggests, it is the third question – i.e., How great is the soul? – that Augustine focuses upon, only answering the other five questions summarily. In *Retractationes*, Augustine describes why this question was his primary concern:

In that same city [Rome], I wrote a dialogue in which there is an investigation and discussion of many things pertaining to the soul: its origin, its nature, its quantity, the reason for its being given to the body, how it is affected on coming to the body, and how, on leaving the body. But since its quantity was discussed most thoroughly in order that, if we could, we might show that it lacks corporeal quantity and yet is something great, the

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<sup>3</sup> *Conf.*, 9.8.17. Unless otherwise noted, the English translation of *Confessiones* used throughout this thesis is *Confessions*, Henry Chadwick, translator (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.12.

<sup>5</sup> *QuAn.*, 1.1.



entire book receives the name from this one investigation: it is called *On the Quantity of the Soul*.<sup>6</sup>

Early into the dialogue, it becomes apparent that Evodius suffers from an intellectual ailment similar to that suffered by Augustine during his period with the Manicheans. Although Augustine was able to recognize “that what is subject to decay is inferior to that which is not,” he was unable to conceive of any substance “except such as is normally seen by the eye.”<sup>7</sup> He was, therefore, unable intellectually to conceive of incorporeal things. Only through the guidance and illumination made possible by the “books of the Platonists” was he able to break free from this intellectual stumbling block.<sup>8</sup> It was through the Platonists that Augustine came to realize that truth has being despite its incorporeal nature, and it was through them that he realized the ontological superiority of the incorporeal over the corporeal. Because Augustine perceived Evodius’ difficulties with conceiving incorporeal things, he devotes most of his treatise to the greatness of the soul, explaining how it is that the greatness that characterizes the soul is due to, rather than in spite of, its incorporeal nature. This explanation of the soul’s greatness encompasses chapters three through thirty-six of *De Quantitate Animae*, but the climax of his discussion is to be found in chapter thirty-three. It is here that Augustine describes and defines seven levels of the soul’s greatness and power, with each level making up the various stages of the soul’s transformation as it ascends toward the vision of God, the highest level the soul can attain and its ultimate goal.

Because *De Quantitate Animae* 33 contains the most sustained examination of the attainment of the vision of God in all of Augustine’s early works, it is this chapter that will be the focus of my examination below as I endeavour to analyze his conception of the vision in his early years as a Christian thinker. My examination will consist of two

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<sup>6</sup> *Retr.*, 7.1.

<sup>7</sup> *Conf.*, VII.1.1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, VII.9.13.

major sections. In the first section, I will describe and analyze the dynamics of Augustine's understanding of how the soul is to attain the vision of God in this life, and to accomplish this task I will look specifically at sections 70-75 of the chapter in which the first six levels of the soul's greatness are portrayed at length. Augustine understands each of these levels to mark a stage in the soul's ascent to God, and as shall be demonstrated, his conception of the means by which this ascent is undertaken demonstrates the influence of Neoplatonic thinking on the young Christian, particularly with regards to the Neoplatonic emphasis on interiority and ascent. The second section of my examination will consist of a prolonged analysis of *De Quantitate Animae* 33.76 in which Augustine describes the seventh level of the soul's greatness, the level at which one attains the vision of God. The focus of my examination of *De Quantitate Animae* 33.76 will be on the specifically Christian emphases found in it. Whereas Augustine will describe the means by which the vision is attained in a way that demonstrates the influence of Neoplatonic thinking, *De Quantitate Animae* 33.76 clearly demonstrates the ways in which his conception of the vision of God at this early stage of his career diverged from that found in Neoplatonism.

### **Chapter 33 of *De Quantitate Animae*: The First Six Levels of the Soul's Greatness**

At the beginning of chapter thirty-three, Augustine explains to the reader what he hopes to accomplish in the following pages. Through an examination of the soul's powers, he suggests that he wants the reader to understand "what the soul means before God, to whom it is very near, provided it is perfectly undefiled, and in whom it finds its supreme and complete perfection."<sup>9</sup> And in the process of defining and outlining the powers of the soul, Augustine declares his hope that such reflection will lead to his own attainment of the highest heights of the soul's ascent which, as shall be demonstrated

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<sup>9</sup> *QuAn.*, 33.70.

below, finds expression in the vision of God by a “perfectly undefiled” soul: “This, at all events, will be my reward,” he writes, “that while I endeavor to explain to you, untutored as I am, what powers the soul has, I may confidently experience what powers I myself have.”<sup>10</sup>

*The First Six Levels of the Soul’s Greatness (De Quantitate Animae 33.70-76)*

It is Augustine’s purpose in *De Quantitate Animae* 33.70-75 to examine the various powers of the soul, and so redirect his gaze, as well as the gaze of his readers toward the incorporeal soul. To accomplish this task, Augustine begins his examination by looking at the most basic powers of the soul, powers that are directly connected to corporeality and are thus easily contemplated. As he ascends up the various levels, however, his focus moves away from the soul’s relationship with the corporeal toward that which is more inward in order to contemplate the incorporeal nature of the soul. Precisely why Augustine makes this interior movement will be explained in greater detail below. At this juncture, it would be helpful to provide an outline of his formulation of the first six levels of the soul’s power, noting in particular the process of interiority.

At the first of the seven levels, Augustine writes, the soul vivifies, preserves, and unifies the body.<sup>11</sup> But while these functions of the soul are vital, they are faculties that are not unique to the human soul but are shared in common with the plant world; “we say of plants too, that they live, we see and acknowledge that each of them is preserved to its own generic being, is nourished, grows, and reproduces itself.”<sup>12</sup> At the second level are the sensory powers of the soul which enable it to distinguish “countless varieties of

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.: “In the first place, then, as anyone can easily observe, the soul by its presence gives life to this earth- and death-bound body. It makes of it a unified organism and maintains it as such, keeping it from disintegrating and wasting away. It provides for a proper, balanced distribution of nourishment to the body’s members. It preserves the body’s harmony and proportion, not only in beauty, but also in growth and reproduction.”

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

savors, odors, sounds, and shapes, by tasting, smelling, hearing, and seeing.”<sup>13</sup> However, these sensory powers are likewise not unique to the human soul but are found “even in brute animals.”<sup>14</sup> At the third level is found the power of reason “which belongs to man exclusively.”<sup>15</sup> Great human achievements – such as the tilling of soil, the building of cities, the development of speech, and the writing of books – have resulted from reason and each of these things “bear the mark of greatness.”<sup>16</sup> But while reason is unique to the human soul, it is “shared by both the learned and the unlearned, by both the good and the wicked,” and because of this Augustine suggests that there are still higher levels of the soul’s greatness.<sup>17</sup> At the fourth level we have the emergence of the soul’s purification of itself. Here the soul recognizes and asserts its superiority over the body and “even over the whole body of the universe itself.”<sup>18</sup> At this level the soul looks within itself and notes “its own power and beauty,” and when it compares its incorporeal beauty to corporeal things it begins to despise the latter, rejecting them in favour of turning “to itself for its own pleasure.”<sup>19</sup> And the more the soul withdraws into itself, “the more does it withdraw from sordid things and cleanse itself and make itself immaculately clean through and through.”<sup>20</sup> This work of purification, however, is not easy. The soul, “noble as it is,” must fight bitterly against the “annoyances and allurements of this world.”<sup>21</sup> It is at the fifth level, Augustine writes, that the soul emerges from its struggles “free from all corruption and purified of all its stains.”<sup>22</sup> And because it has accomplished this task the soul can now begin its ascent to the divine: “On this level it

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 33.71.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 33.72.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 33.73. Cf. Roland J. Teske, “St. Augustine and the Vision of God,” *Collectanea Augustiniana – Augustine: Mystic and Mystagogue*, Joseph Reino, et. al., eds. (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 288.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 33.73.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 33.74.

conceives in every way how great it is in every respect; and when it has understood that, then with unbounded and wondrous confidence it advances toward God, that is, to the immediate contemplation of truth; and it attains that supreme and transcendent reward for which it has worked so hard.”<sup>23</sup> With the soul’s eye sufficiently cleansed, it can now make this advancement towards God, and this movement marks the sixth level.<sup>24</sup>

Whereas the fourth level involves the purification of the soul so that “it will not look without purpose and without reason” – that is, so that it will not look in vain for what it cannot see in its sullied state – and the fifth level involves the preservation and protection of “the health of the eye” of the soul, the sixth level involves directing the gaze of the soul’s eye “calmly and squarely to what is to be seen.”<sup>25</sup> This movement towards God, Augustine emphasizes, cannot occur apart from the soul’s purification of itself, for it is only when the soul “controls [its] thoughts and drains off from them all the dregs of attachment to corruptible things” that it can contemplate the incorruptible God.<sup>26</sup>

Augustine’s conception of the first six levels of the soul’s ascent provide the framework by which this renunciation of the corporeal world occurs. Through a process of interior withdrawal, whereby the soul directs its gaze away from the temporal and returns to the contemplation of its own incorporeal power and beauty, the soul gradually purifies itself of the taint of corporeality. In so doing it returns to its original likeness to God, and is once again capable of contemplating the divine. While there are significant aspects of Augustine’s conception of interiority that diverge from that of Neoplatonism – I will examine these in greater detail below – the influence of Neoplatonic thought on Augustine at this early stage of his career is clearly evident in *De Quantitate Animae*

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 33..74.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 33.75.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Cf. Teske, *op. cit.*, 288.

<sup>26</sup> *QuAn.*, 33.75. He adds: “Those who wish to do this before they are cleansed and healed recoil so in the presence of that light of truth that they may think there is in it not only no goodness, but even great evil.”

33.70-75. To illustrate this influence, a brief examination of Neoplatonism's understanding of interiority and ascent would not be misplaced.

*Neoplatonism and the Vision of God*

Born c. 205 C.E., Plotinus was an ardent follower of Plato's teachings who, in his endeavour to defend Platonism from Aristotelian and Stoic attacks, promulgated a form of Platonism that came to be labeled as Neoplatonism.<sup>27</sup> Embedded in this new school of thought was an emphasis on mysticism and on mystical experience.<sup>28</sup> Porphyry, a disciple of Plotinus, composed a biography of his teacher in which Plotinus is portrayed as an ardent spiritual seeker, never wavering from his commitment to attain union with the divine.<sup>29</sup> Porphyry informs us that, loving the incorporeal One with "all his being," Plotinus attained purity of soul through strenuous labour in order "to free himself and rise above the bitter waves of this blood-drenched life."<sup>30</sup> Through this intense discipline Plotinus became "God-like," and due to his purity of soul he was able "to become Uniate, to approach to the God over all," to ascend to the divine.<sup>31</sup> According to Porphyry, Plotinus experienced this ascent of the soul four times in his life, and indeed, Porphyry himself acknowledged that he too had attained this level of mystical experience once.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Lloyd P. Gerson, "Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, Lloyd P. Gerson, ed (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6.

<sup>28</sup> Of course, mystical themes are not absent from Plato's writings as Bernard McGinn has convincingly argued (Cf. *The Foundations of Mysticism* [New York: Crossroad, 1991], 24-35). For example, McGinn suggests that the "Allegory of the Cave" in book VII of the *Republic* "is essentially an account of the spiritual path that begins with awakening...and proceeds through painful purification and gradual illumination to end in vision" (29). "The time has now arrived," Plato exhorts in this section, "at which they must raise the eye of the soul to the universal light which enlightens all things, and behold the absolute good" (*Rep* VII.540. The English translation is from Benjamin Jowett, trans., *The Republic* [Toronto: Vintage Classics, 1991]). This exhortation to "raise the eye of the soul" in order to behold the One who dwells in light receives new impetus and stress in the writings of Plotinus and his disciple Porphyry.

<sup>29</sup> Porphyry writes that the everyday affairs of this world never interrupted Plotinus' "intention towards the Supreme" (*ViPl.*, 9). The English translation of "On the Life of Plotinus and the Arrangement of his Work," is taken from Stephen MacKenna, trans., *The Enneads* (Toronto: Penguin, 1991).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

*Ennead* I.6 – ‘On Beauty’ – and I.8 – ‘The Nature and Source of Evil’ – are two early Plotinian treatises, unanimously recognized as having been read by Augustine prior to his conversion to Christianity, which provide us with perhaps the clearest exposition of Neoplatonism’s conception of the vision of God.<sup>33</sup> In I.6 Plotinus posits the existence of One from whom all things emanate. This One, he writes in another treatise, is formless and “transcends being,”<sup>34</sup> but since all things emanate from the One, it is to the One that “everything is intended to return.”<sup>35</sup> Because human souls emanate from this divine principle, Plotinus suggests that our souls can also be said to be divine.<sup>36</sup> However, for reasons that are not explored in great detail, this divine soul finds itself fallen, and this fallenness manifests itself by the encrusting of alien matter to the soul:<sup>37</sup> “This is the fall of the Soul,” Plotinus writes, “this entry into Matter.”<sup>38</sup> And due to its unnatural union with the corporeal, the soul is constantly “flickering hither and thither at the objects of sense, deeply infected with the taint of the body, occupied always in Matter, and absorbing Matter into itself.”<sup>39</sup> The soul is thus held in bondage to the body, for the latter

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Robert A. Herrera, “Augustine: Spiritual Centaur?” *Augustine: Mystic and Mystagogue*, Joseph Reino, et al., eds. (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 161-162; Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 86-87; Robert J. O’Connell, *St. Augustine’s Early Theory of Man, A.D. 386-391* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968), 7-9; Gerald Bonner, “The Spirituality of St Augustine and its Influence on Western Mysticism,” *Sobornost* 4.2 (1982), 150; John J. O’Meara, “The Neoplatonism of Saint Augustine,” *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought*, Dominic J. O’Meara, ed. (Norfolk, Virginia: International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, 1982), 37; Frederick Van Fleteren, “A Reply to Robert O’Connell,” *Augustinian Studies* 21 (1990), 133-134; Robert J. O’Connell, “Faith, Reason, and Ascent to Vision in St. Augustine,” *Augustinian Studies* 21 (1990), 88-90. For a concise synopsis of the academic debate which has raged over the past century regarding which Neoplatonic texts Augustine read in his early years see Philip Cary, *Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2000), 31-38 and John J. O’Meara, *The Young Augustine: An Introduction to the Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York: Longman, 1980), 130-142.

<sup>34</sup> *Enn.*, V.5.6.

<sup>35</sup> Anthony Meredith, “Plotinus,” *The Study of Spirituality*, Cheslyn Jones, et al, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 98

<sup>36</sup> On Plotinus’ understanding of the divinity of the soul, see A.H. Armstrong, “Salvation, Plotinian and Christian,” *Downside Review* 75.240 (1957), 132.

<sup>37</sup> *Enn.*, I.6.4.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, I.8.14.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, I.6.4.

causes the former to lose control of its ‘higher sense’;<sup>40</sup> that is to say, the powers that enable the soul to ascend to, and contemplate, the One are hampered, even silenced, by the body which “crushes the soul back”<sup>41</sup> making it “unable in its cowardly blenching to see the uttermost brightness” – i.e., God.<sup>42</sup> This dualistic cosmology, in which the body is considered the prison of the divine soul, is well illustrated in an episode from Plotinus’ life recounted by Porphyry. When asked by a sculptor if he could make an image of him before his death, Plotinus responded simply by stating what undoubtedly appeared to him to be self-evident: “Is it not enough to carry about this image in which nature has enclosed us? Do you really think I must also consent to leave, as a desirable spectacle to posterity, an image of the image?”<sup>43</sup>

This dualism translated into a Neoplatonic soteriology, if one can use the term in this context, that emphasized the liberation of the soul from the body in order to attain the vision of God. Plotinus describes the vision as follows:

[W]e must ascend again toward the Good, the desired of every Soul. Anyone that has seen This, knows what I intend when I say that it is beautiful. Even the desire of it is to be desired as a Good. To attain it is for those that will take the upward path, who will set all their forces towards it, who will divest themselves of all that we have put on in our descent: so, to those that approach the Holy Celebrations of the Mysteries, there are appointed purifications and the laying aside of the garments worn before, and the entry into nakedness – until, in passing, on the upward way, all that is other than the God, each in the solitude of himself shall behold that solitary-dwelling Existence, the Apart, the unmingled, the pure, that from Which all things depend, for Which all look and live and act and know, the Source of Life and Intellection and of Being...Beholding the Being – the Chorus of all Existence, the Self-Intent that ever gives forth and never takes – resting, rapt, in the vision and possession of so lofty a loveliness, growing to its likeness, what Beauty can the Soul yet lack? For this, the Beauty supreme, the absolute, and the primal, fashions its lovers to Beauty and makes them also worthy of love.<sup>44</sup>

To attain the vision of God, according to Plotinus, is to attain knowledge of God for this vision marks the complete self-revelation of God to the purified soul. Seeing nothing

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., I.8.14.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., I.6.9.

<sup>43</sup> *ViPl.*, I.

<sup>44</sup> *Enn.*, I.6.7.



“that is other than the God,” the soul contemplates “the Source of Life and Intellection and of Being” and is transformed in the process. For it is in this vision that the soul not only sees God, but actually possesses and is possessed by God, united in an embrace of Beauty with that which is beautiful. Perhaps René Arnou best describes Plotinus’ conception of the vision of God when he writes:

Platonic contemplation appears as a sudden and immediate vision of true Being, or, if one ascends as far as possible on the scale of values, a union with the Supreme Good, a mysterious union which is not just the vision of an object by a subject, but the taking possession of the subject by a superior reality in such a way that the love that responds to the attraction of the Beautiful and the Good enjoys a role just as necessary as the intelligence which gazes.<sup>45</sup>

The means of attaining this transforming vision of God is, Plotinus writes, a return to oneself away from material, sensible objects which “are hindrances to the Soul in its proper Act.”<sup>46</sup> E.R. Dodds describes the Plotinian emphasis on interior withdrawal in the following way: “[The individual] is a creature possessed of will, and it is open to him to realize his true self – not by the assertion of illusory independence, but by a voluntary self-identification with his source, a deliberate reversal of the Outgoing, in a word, by a Return.”<sup>47</sup> Only by redirecting the gaze of the soul back to itself, only by withdrawing interiorly away from the corporeal back to the incorporeal nature of the soul, can the soul be purified. “He that has the strength,” Plotinus exhorts, “let him arise and withdraw into himself, foregoing all that is known by the eyes, turning away forever from the material beauty that once made his joy.”<sup>48</sup> Through the progressive retraining of the soul, whereby it learns to reject and release itself from corporeality by interior withdrawal, the soul is enabled to focus instead on incorporeal truth and beauty. And as the soul frees and purifies itself from the taint of the corporeal it becomes, in Plotinus’ words, “all Idea

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<sup>45</sup> As quoted in Bernard McGinn, *op. cit.*, 28.

<sup>46</sup> *Enn.*, I.8.4.

<sup>47</sup> E.R. Dodds, “Traditional and Personal Achievement in the Philosophy of Plotinus,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 50 (1960), 3.

<sup>48</sup> *Enn.*, I.6.8.

and Reason, wholly free of body, intellective, entirely of that divine order from which the wellspring of Beauty rises and all the race of Beauty.”<sup>49</sup> By withdrawing into itself the soul is purified of its union with the material and gradually becomes capable of contemplating its own incorporeal nature. And in so doing, the soul prepares itself to ascend to the contemplation of the incorporeal One who is the fountainhead of all beauty and truth.

*The First Six Levels of the Soul’s Greatness: Augustine’s Conception of Interiority and Ascent and the Influence of Neoplatonism*

As this brief examination of Plotinus’ conception of ascent through interiority demonstrates, Augustine was clearly influenced by Neoplatonic thought in this regard at the time he composed *De Quantitate Animae*. Other writings from around this period, such as *De Musica* and *De Vera Religione*, also heavily utilize the Neoplatonic motif of interiority and ascent, further demonstrating the degree to which the concept inspired the young Christian.<sup>50</sup> The reasons why Augustine placed such emphasis on interiority, as it is described in *De Quantitate Animae* 33.70-75, will now be examined.

*De Quantitate Animae* demonstrates that Augustine held to a dualistic cosmology, not unlike that of the Neoplatonists – indeed, Augustine informs us in book VII of *Confessiones* that his conception of incorporeality and corporeality was deeply influenced by his reading of the Platonists. This understanding of the world posits that there is that which is corporeal and that which is incorporeal, and that the latter is ontologically superior to the former because corporeal things are subject to decay and death whereas incorporeal things are immortal and incorruptible. The problem, given this ontological gap between the corporeal and the incorporeal, is the relationship between the body and the soul. Evodius himself recognizes the problematic nature of this relationship when he

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., I.6.6.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Frederick Van Fleteren, “Augustine and the Possibility of the Vision of God in this Life,” 9-12.

asks, at the beginning of the treatise, why it is that the soul is united with the body.<sup>51</sup>

Augustine never really answers this question in *De Quantitate Animae*, but appears to work with an understanding that the union of body and soul is problematic and must be transcended if the vision of God is to be attained.<sup>52</sup>

The reason why this union of body and soul is problematic, as the above description of the first six levels of the soul's greatness demonstrates, is that this union leads the soul to become inordinately attached to temporal things, a point also made by Plotinus. In earlier chapters of *De Quantitate Animae* Augustine suggests that the soul is created "like to God," and as such, it has a unique nature distinct from all other created things.<sup>53</sup> Unlike corporeal things which differ from God precisely because of their corporeality, the soul is created incorporeal. And because it is created like to God, Augustine writes that its homeland "is God Himself by whom it has been created."<sup>54</sup> The problem, however, is that humanity has tended not to recognize its own power and beauty and has instead found its joy in the senses rather than in the instruments of the soul that "are far superior to the senses."<sup>55</sup> Consequently, instead of making itself independent of the body as far as it can, the soul embraces temporal things through the senses, taking pride of ownership in the "goods of this world."<sup>56</sup> And the more it does so, Augustine suggests, "the greater likeness it gives man to beast."<sup>57</sup> The soul thus appears to attach itself to corporeal things, according to Augustine, as a result of misplaced desire for prideful<sup>58</sup> self-gratification which serves only to sully the soul with the taint of

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<sup>51</sup> *QuAn.* 1.1.

<sup>52</sup> However, as will be noted below, this idea that the body must be transcended for the ascent of the soul to occur is combined rather paradoxically with an emphasis on the resurrection of the body. Exactly how these two ideas are to be correlated is never explained in *De Quantitate Animae*.

<sup>53</sup> *QuAn.*, 2.3.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.2.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.54.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.73.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.54.

<sup>58</sup> I use the word 'pride' here reservedly as Augustine never actually uses this word in *De Quantitate Animae*. However, the thrust of his argument, as will be explored in greater detail below, appears to

corporeality. The only means of transcending or overcoming this attachment is to flee the corporeal: “[W]hoever desires to restore himself to the state in which he was made by God, that is, like to God,” Augustine writes, “should condemn all corporeal things and renounce this whole world, which, as we see, is corporeal. There simply is no other way of saving the soul or of renewing it, or of reconciling it with its maker.”<sup>59</sup>

The means by which corporeal things are condemned, as already noted, is through a Plotinian-style interior withdrawal whereby the soul redirects its desires in order to give “first preference to joy experienced within”<sup>60</sup> by turning “to itself for its own pleasure”<sup>61</sup> instead of to corporeal things. As the soul directs its attention inwardly away from corporeal things it begins the process of remaking itself into the image of God; the image which God “committed to our care as something most precious and dear, when he gave us to ourselves so constituted that nothing can take precedence to us save He Himself.”<sup>62</sup> By withdrawing into itself, the soul gradually returns to its original incorporeal state – a state in which the soul is “like to God” – without the taint of corporeality to drag it back down from the incorporeal God. Thus, Augustine argues, even before death releases the soul from the body, the soul should be taught “that it must not fall back on the senses any more than necessity demands; but it should rather retire into itself, away from the senses, and become a child of God again.”<sup>63</sup>

The logic behind Augustine’s exhortation to interior withdrawal as a means of attaining the vision of God is fairly straightforward, and can perhaps best be explained by using a metaphor provided in *Soliloquia*.<sup>64</sup> Using the sun as a metaphor for the divine light gazed upon by the purified soul, Augustine argues that, just as the human eye must

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revolve around an understanding that pride is inimical to the ascent to God and that humility must be practiced instead. More will be mentioned regarding this topic below.

<sup>59</sup> *QuAn.*, 3.4.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.54.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.73.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.55.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.4.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. *Solil.*, 1.23.

train itself before it can look directly at the sun's light, so the eye of the soul must train itself before it can gaze confidently at the divine light of God. Thus, he suggests that the eye should progress from looking at objects that are illuminated by the sun's light, through to things that reflect the light in a beautiful way, to objects that closely approximate the light of the sun. The eye is coaxed to accommodate itself toward progressively greater and brighter lights in order to bring it to the point where it can finally and confidently gaze upon the sun itself: "When someone has by these steps got accustomed to things, quickly or slowly, all in proportion to his own strength," Augustine writes, "he will, without fear and with great pleasure, come to see the sun."<sup>65</sup>

It is through interior withdrawal, as Augustine describes it in chapter thirty-three, that the soul can raise its eyes to the divine light. For by directing its gaze from the corporeal to the incorporeal beauty of itself, the soul is gradually trained to reject the corporeal and to retreat from its unnatural union with corporeal things. Only when the soul has, in Augustine's words, "sloughed off the body," can it begin the process of purification whereby that which is corporeal is gradually replaced by the incorporeal as the focus of the soul's attention.<sup>66</sup> Interior withdrawal is thus for Augustine, as it was for the Neoplatonists, a means of self-purification and retraining intended to lead the soul back to its original incorporeal state.<sup>67</sup> Once the soul has attained purification – and Augustine does not doubt that the determined soul will do just that – it can and will ascend to its homeland, to God, to gaze upon him as he is.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> *QuAn.*, 33.73.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. Frederick Van Fleteren, "The Ascent of the Soul in the Augustinian Tradition," 94. Referring to the understanding of interiority as a means of retraining in the mind of Plato and the Platonists, Van Fleteren writes: "The principal problem, as Plato and Platonists see it, is that the mind is too accustomed to material things to be able to view the ideas directly. By the kind of training that Plato envisions, the mind will progressively move from the material to the immaterial, and will be able to grasp the unchanging amid the changing, so that it can grasp what is itself spiritual and immutable.

<sup>68</sup> *QuAn.*, 33.75.

### **Chapter 33 of *De Quantitate Animae*: The Seventh Level of the Soul's Greatness and the Vision of God**

I have thus far provided a brief analysis of the first six levels of the soul's greatness, and have demonstrated that Augustine's exhortation to interior withdrawal bears similarities to that found in the writings of the Neoplatonists. Having explored the means by which the vision is attained, it is now time to examine Augustine's conception of the vision itself, described in *De Quantitate Animae* 33.76, which he considers to be the seventh level of the soul's greatness. My examination of this seventh level will consist of two parts. The first will focus on a portion of 33.76 in which Augustine describes the attainment of the vision, explaining the delights and joys that accompany this contemplation. As shall be seen from the quotation to follow, Augustine understands the vision of God to be attainable in this life. How and why he understands the vision as such will be of key concern in my examination below, and in order to answer this question I will need to analyze what Augustine writes regarding the powers and capacity of the soul – its greatness – both in *De Quantitate Animae* 33.76 as well as in the rest of the treatise. This examination will demonstrate that, while Augustine posits a conception of the soul's potentiality that tends to emphasize its strength rather than its weakness – thus accounting for his optimism regarding the attainability of the vision in this life – he combines this understanding of the soul's ability to ascend to God with an emphasis upon the necessity of divine assistance, thus indicating a substantial and important departure from Neoplatonic thought regarding the attainment of the vision. The second part of my analysis of *De Quantitate Animae* 33.76 will look particularly at the specifically Christian emphases found within the passage which serve to provide concrete definition to Augustine's references to divine assistance found throughout the book. I will argue that Augustine's inclusion of references to the church and to the incarnation of the Son of God within a passage in which he is describing the attainment of the vision of God

demonstrates that, however much he may borrow from Neoplatonism, Augustine understands the vision of God to be attained within the context of the church through the incarnation of the Son of God.

*The Attainment of the Vision in this Life, the Soul's Greatness, and the Necessity of Divine Assistance*

After recounting the process of interiority that allows the soul to make its ascent to God, Augustine writes the following in *De Quantitate Animae* 33.76 to describe the seventh, and ultimate, level of the soul's ascent – the vision of God:

Now at last we are in the very vision and contemplation of truth, which is the seventh and last level of the soul; and here we no longer have a level but in reality a home at which one arrives via those levels. What shall I say are the delights, what the enjoyment, of the supreme and true Goodness, what the everlasting peace it breathes upon us? Great and peerless souls – and we believe that they have actually seen and are still seeing these things – have told us this so far as they deemed it should be spoken of. This would I tell you now: if we hold most faithfully to the course which God enjoins on us and which we have undertaken to follow, we shall come by God's power and wisdom to that supreme Cause or that supreme Author or supreme Principle of all things, or whatever more appropriate appellative there may be for so great a reality. And when we understand that, we shall see truly how *all things under the sun are the vanity of the vain* [Ecclesiastes 1.2]. For "vanity" is deceit; and "the vain" are to be understood as persons who are deceived, or persons who deceive, or both. Further, one may discern how great a difference there is between these and the things that truly exist; and yet, since all things have also been created and have God as their Maker, they are wonderful and beautiful when considered by themselves, although in comparison with the things that truly exist, they are as nothing...

Furthermore, in the contemplation of truth, no matter what degree of contemplation you reach, the delight is so great, there is such purity, such innocence, a conviction in all things that is so absolute, that one could think he really knew nothing when aforetime he fancied he had knowledge. And that the soul may not be impeded from giving full allegiance to the fullness of truth, death – meaning complete escape and acquittal from this body – which previously was feared, is now desired as the greatest boon.<sup>69</sup>

This seventh level of the soul's greatness – which, as Augustine emphasizes above, is less a level and more a lived reality – is the soul's total vision of God as he is. Having ascended through the previous six levels, the eye of the soul casts its gaze

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 33.76.

squarely on the “supreme Principle of all things,” and there experiences a vision of God which fills the soul with hitherto unknown delight, peace, and purity. Free from all that hampered it in the past, the soul sees and enjoys the “supreme and true Goodness” that had eluded it until this point. Although once united to corporeal things, although once only able to see corporeal things, the soul is now confronted with ultimate being. And the vision is so intense that all that the soul once considered to have being – that is, corporeal, temporal things – now seem not to exist at all in comparison with the all-consuming vision of that which truly is.

The question which confronts us at this point is this: Can the vision of God, according to Augustine, be attained in this life? It would appear, on the basis of the above quotation, that his answer is affirmative. “Great and peerless souls,” Augustine writes enthusiastically, “and we believe that they have *actually seen* and *are still seeing* these things – have told us [the details of the vision of God] as they deemed it should be spoken of.”<sup>70</sup> Although he does not specifically say who these “great and peerless souls” are, some have assumed, on the basis of Augustine’s exposure to Plotinus’ *Enneads*, as well as his exposure to Paul’s writings – specifically 2 Corinthians 12.2-4<sup>71</sup> – that he had both Plotinus and Paul in mind as he penned these words.<sup>72</sup> However, whether he had these specific men in mind matters less than the fact that Augustine appears to maintain that there are those who have attained the vision in this life and have described the delight and peace which comes from contemplating God. Furthermore, Augustine’s reference to those of his contemporaries who “are still seeing these things” – whether or not he would

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid. (italics mine).

<sup>71</sup> “I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows – was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal person is permitted to repeat.”

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Dom Cuthbert Butler, *op. cit.*, 43 who writes that the “reference to the experience of ‘certain great and incomparable souls’ is without doubt to the ecstasies of Plotinus and Porphyry.” Joseph Collaran agrees with Butler’s assessment, but prefers, like myself, to argue that St. Paul should also be included in this list of those in the back of Augustine’s mind (See Collaran’s footnote 101 in his translation of *De Quantitate Animae*). See also Teske, *op. cit.*, 289.



include himself in this list is a matter of conjecture – again suggests that he understands the vision of God to be attainable in this life. The second paragraph quoted above further supports the interpretation that Augustine conceived of the vision in this way. For instance, after writing about the delight, purity, and knowledge attained in the vision – knowledge so perfect “that one could think he really knew nothing when aforetime he fancied he had knowledge”<sup>73</sup> – he writes that one of the benefits of attaining the vision is the dissolution of the soul’s fear of death. Whereas once the soul was afraid of death due to its unnatural union with the body,<sup>74</sup> the soul that attains the vision in this life no longer fears death, “meaning complete escape and acquittal from this body.”<sup>75</sup> Rather, Augustine posits that, having experienced the delight of contemplation in this life, the soul looks to death with anticipation, presumably because it has experienced in this life what it will experience in the life to come.

Interestingly, when we compare this suggestion by the early Augustine that the vision of God can be attained in this life to the writings of the mature Augustine, something of a discrepancy appears. For example, in the last book of *De Civitate Dei*, written near the end of his life, in which he describes the eschatological glory to come for those who persevere, Augustine describes the attainment of the vision in eschatological terms:

As [the angels] see, so shall we also see; but we do not yet see in this way, and it is for this reason that the apostle uses the words quoted a moment ago: ‘Now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face’ [1 Corinthians 13.12]. This vision is reserved as the reward of our faith; and of it the apostle John also speaks, saying: ‘When He shall appear, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is.’<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> *QuAn.*, 33.76.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 33.73.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.76.

<sup>76</sup> *CD*, XXII.29.

Similar sentiments are expressed in *De Trinitate*, also written late in his life, in which the vision of God is discussed only in eschatological categories.<sup>77</sup> Far from being something we can attain in this life, Augustine writes that “[t]his contemplation is promised us as the end of all activities and the eternal perfection of all joys.”<sup>78</sup> Sentiments such as this seem to stand in sharp contrast to those found in *De Quantitate Animae* in which the emphasis is on the ‘this-worldly’ attainment of that which will be eternally enjoyed once “complete escape and acquittal from this body” is achieved through death.<sup>79</sup> The question that must be answered, therefore, is why and how the early Augustine argued for the attainability of the vision of God in this life. I will argue below that his suggestion that the vision of God can be attained in this life is partially due to his understanding of the soul’s potentiality; a potentiality that is not drastically compromised by the soul’s attachment to corporeal things.

As mentioned above, by finding its enjoyment in corporeal things instead of in itself, the soul attaches itself to these corporeal things, and the means of transcending this attachment to corporeality is through interior withdrawal whereby the soul purifies itself and regains the likeness to God in which it was originally created. It is true that Augustine consistently emphasizes throughout *De Quantitate Animae* that, due to the soul’s unnatural entanglement with corporeal things, turning away from these objects to return into itself is not necessarily easy. The enticements of this world are great, tempting the soul to find its enjoyment in them. Nevertheless, while the soul is attached to these corporeal things due to its desire to utilize them for its own gratification, Augustine does not appear to maintain that this attachment drastically compromises the capabilities of the soul to cleanse itself of its sordidness through interiority. He does, as shall be demonstrated shortly, understand the soul to be weakened somewhat by its

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<sup>77</sup> *De Trinitate* will be explored in greater detail in chapter 3.

<sup>78</sup> *De Trin.*, I.17. See also I.3, 16, 21, 31.

<sup>79</sup> *QuAn.*, 33.76.

attachment to the corporeal, and it is for this reason that he will posit the necessity of divine assistance. Nevertheless, the emphasis in *De Quantitate Animae* is on the soul's greatness. There is, Augustine acknowledges, "nothing more difficult than to fear death and to refrain from the allurements of this world in a degree commensurate with the jeopardies involved. Yet, so great is the soul that it can do even this."<sup>80</sup> That is to say, the attachment of the soul to corporeal things is not so strong as to be irreversible in this life, for the soul can, through "strenuous effort" and "mighty struggle," return into itself to enjoy its own incorporeal power and beauty.<sup>81</sup> It is the task of the soul, by redirecting its gaze, to "cleanse itself and make itself immaculately clean through and through,"<sup>82</sup> and to "remake [itself] in His image."<sup>83</sup> And, when the soul has purified itself of the taint of corporeality, it will attain "that supreme and transcendent reward for which it has worked so hard."<sup>84</sup> Thus, throughout *De Quantitate Animae*, Augustine appears to argue that through perseverance and determination the soul, by virtue of its greatness – i.e., its power and abilities – can and will overcome its entanglement with the corporeal, return to its incorporeal state, and gaze upon the incorporeal God.

At first glance, this conception of the soul's greatness seems to bear some similarities with Plotinus' conception of the innate ability of the soul to ascend to the divine apart from divine aid. The soul, according to Plotinus, has no need of divine aid, but can simply choose to return to itself and so realize its true nature.<sup>85</sup> And once it has withdrawn into itself, the soul both recognizes its own "race and worth"<sup>86</sup> and perceives its inherent power, and by the "strength of this power" the soul "makes upwards toward

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 33.73.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 28.55.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 33.75.

<sup>85</sup> E.R. Dodds, "Tradition and Personal Achievement in the Philosophy of Plotinus," 3–4.

<sup>86</sup> *Enn.*, V.1.1.

Him,” to the vision of God.<sup>87</sup> There is no need for a guide, Plotinus writes, because the soul has the inherent capabilities to ascend to the One.<sup>88</sup>

As has been seen, Augustine borrows much from Plotinus and his disciples regarding the process of interiority. However, while it may appear that he also borrows from the Neoplatonic conception of the soul’s inherent abilities, a closer reading demonstrates that this is not the case. Rather, in *De Quantitate Animae* Augustine combines his emphasis on the greatness of the soul, a greatness that allows the soul to work for its own purification, with an understanding of the necessity of divine assistance not found in Plotinus’ writings.<sup>89</sup> The following quotation illustrates the emphasis placed on divine aid for the soul to attain its goal of the vision of God. Referring to the purification of the soul Augustine writes:

But to my mind this calls for action than which none is more laborious, none that is more akin to inaction, for it is such as the soul cannot begin or complete except with the help of Him to whom it yields itself. Hence it is that man’s reformation is dependent on the mercy of Him to whose goodness and power he owes his transformation.<sup>90</sup>

We see in this quotation something of a paradox with regards to the purification of the soul. For while he stresses that the soul’s purification involves “laborious” action, he also stresses that the cleansing of the soul has a passive element in that God is the source of the soul’s transformation. Similar sentiments are expressed throughout the treatise. For instance, when writing of the greatness of the soul in his account of the fourth level of the soul’s greatness, Augustine qualifies his assessment of the soul’s abilities by emphasizing that the soul can only reject the corporeal and ascend to God “by the help, of

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., V.1.3

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., I.6.9.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Robert Innes, “Integrating the Self through the Desire of God,” *Augustinian Studies* 28.1 (1997), 72; Arthur Hilary Armstrong, “Salvation, Plotinian and Christian,” *Downside Review* 75.240 (1957), 135. Some, like John J. O’Meara, have argued that Porphyry provided the early Augustine with a rudimentary understanding of divine grace or assistance (cf. “The Neoplatonism of Saint Augustine,” 37). However, as will be demonstrated below, Augustine appears to have a distinctly Christian understanding of divine assistance which would have been unrecognizable to Porphyry.

<sup>90</sup> *QuAn.*, 28.55.

course, of the goodness of the supreme and true God” for “[i]t is to this divine goodness that the soul most dutifully and confidently commits itself for help and success in the difficult task of self-purification.”<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, in Augustine’s description of the vision itself in *De Quantitate Animae* 33.76 quoted above, it is significant that he does not equate the soul’s attainment of the vision to the power of the soul but to the power of God: “[I]f we hold most faithfully to the course which God enjoins on us and which we have undertaken to follow, we shall come by God’s power and wisdom to that supreme Cause.”<sup>92</sup>

This emphasis on divine aid and guidance stands in sharp contrast to Neoplatonic thinking. While both Plotinus and Augustine underline the importance of interiority as a means of ascent, each has a different understanding of how interiority and ascent works, and central to this difference is their diverging conceptions of the divinity of the soul. Plotinus understood the soul to be divine, and thereby posited that the soul had the natural capabilities to ascend to the One. In *De Quantitate Animae* Augustine emphatically denies the divinity of the soul, instead emphasizing its createdness. He may write “that among all things [God] has created nothing is closer to God” than the soul, but the operative idea here is that the soul is indeed created.<sup>93</sup> The soul, Augustine writes, is the immortal likeness of God, but this immortal likeness has been created, and is thus not divine.<sup>94</sup> The significance of this denial of the soul’s divinity is that, unlike Plotinus, Augustine posited an understanding of the soul as ontologically distinct and inferior to God, and therefore in need of special assistance to make the ascent to its creator. Robert Innes perhaps best describes this fundamental difference between Neoplatonism and Augustine and its relationship to the latter’s conception of divine assistance:

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 33.73.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 33.76.

<sup>93</sup> *QuAn.*, 34.77.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 2.3.

Human beings according to Neo-Platonism had a natural tendency to return to the One from whom they had originally emanated. According to the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, human beings are ontologically distinct from God. They do not, therefore, simply return to God by natural processes nor may they autonomously attain to God by their own efforts. The Christian God is not only the end of the soul's journey but also supplies the way.<sup>95</sup>

Augustine's emphasis on divine assistance in *De Quantitate Animae*, therefore, constitutes a significant departure from Neoplatonic philosophy, which had so influenced the young Christian. At the same time, however, it would be erroneous to argue that his conception of divine aid as formulated in *De Quantitate Animae* parallels that found in his later writings. Whereas in *De Quantitate Animae* Augustine posits a fairly high view of human potentiality, his later writings demonstrate that this conception is abandoned in favour of a soteriology that stresses the devastating effects of sin on humanity with a correlating emphasis on divine assistance, assistance which is all-encompassing. For instance, he will argue in *De Trinitate* that humanity is so weakened by sin that it lacks all ability to contemplate divine things and that it must rely entirely on the assistance of God who grants the believer faith in the incarnate Word and gives of himself in the Holy Spirit so as to purify the believer and so bring him/her to the vision of God eschatologically. The emphasis for Augustine in these later texts is on divine aid in the face of human powerlessness, and thus we find him less willing to attribute anything with regards to the work of salvation to human potentiality.<sup>96</sup>

In contrast, we find in *De Quantitate Animae* a soteriology that stresses both human ability and the necessity of divine assistance, thus indicating that while Augustine rejected the Neoplatonic conception of the soul's ability to transcend its attachment to the corporeal by virtue of its innate ability and greatness – an ability that Plotinus posited on the basis of the soul's divinity – he is still willing to maintain that the soul is capable of being an active participant in its own purification. That is to say, he seems to posit a

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<sup>95</sup> *Op. cit.*, 72.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. Frederick Van Fleteren, "Augustine and the Possibility of the Vision of God in this Life," 12-14.

synergistic soteriology in *De Quantitate Animae* which would later be rejected as he came to understand the extent to which human attachment to temporal things prevented humanity from reaching out to the eternal God. This attachment to temporality, as mentioned above, is understood by Augustine in *De Quantitate Animae* to be the consequence of misplaced desire, and while he acknowledges that it is difficult to reorient one's focus so as to foster "the ardent desire to understand truth and perfection" Augustine appears to understand this attachment to be surmountable.<sup>97</sup>

Exactly why he argued that the soul, with God's help, is capable in this life of transcending its attachment to corporeality in *De Quantitate Animae* while rejecting this conception in later works is a matter of conjecture, but I would suggest that this discrepancy revolves around the evolution of Augustine's conception of the binding powers of love. While it is true that in *De Quantitate Animae* Augustine characterizes the human dilemma as having its origin in the misplaced desires of the soul, it appears clear that he does not view this desire to be as potent a force as he will understand love to be in the latter two works. In *De Quantitate Animae* Augustine understands wrongful desire to be problematic, but he does not understand this desire to harm the soul to a great extent. This wrongful desire weakens the soul to some degree, thus requiring the assistance of God, but "the power and capacity of the soul" – its greatness – is not so weakened as to prevent the soul from participating in its own purification, albeit through divine assistance.<sup>98</sup> The soul's desire for corporeal things acts to bind the soul to them, but this bondage is not understood in *De Quantitate Animae* to be overly powerful, thus allowing the determined soul to transcend this bondage and ascend to God. In later writings – such as *Confessiones* and *De Trinitate* which will be explored below – Augustine will characterize the human dilemma, not as a problem of misplaced desire, but as a problem

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<sup>97</sup> *QuAn.*, 33.75.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.77.

of wrongly-directed love. While space does not permit a detailed examination of Augustine's conception of love as a binding force, the point I wish to make here is that, while he may have understood desire to be a form of love in *De Quantitate Animae*,<sup>99</sup> this connection is never explicitly made, and furthermore his understanding of the binding effects of desire never approximates his conception of the binding effects of love which he will formulate in later writings. In works like *Confessiones* and *De Trinitate* Augustine will refer to the love the soul has for created things as binding the soul to those things irreparably apart from the assistance of God. Weakened beyond human repair because of this love, the soul is forced to rely on the divine aid to ascend to God. Such an understanding of desire in these terms is not to be found in *De Quantitate Animae*, perhaps explaining why Augustine is willing in this text to emphasize the power and greatness of the soul to a degree not found in his later texts.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the degree to which Augustine emphasizes the necessity of interior withdrawal as a means of purifying the soul gradually lessens as his understanding of human sinfulness develops. Plotinus' conception of interiority clearly inspired the early Augustine, and in *De Quantitate Animae* he is content to posit interior withdrawal as being central to the purification of the soul. Exactly how this process of interiority is enacted within the context of the community of the church – which, as shall be seen shortly, he emphasizes as also being central to the soul's purification – is ambiguously formulated in *De Quantitate Animae*. Such ambiguity is eliminated in a work like *De Trinitate* in which interiority is largely rejected as a viable means of purification due to the extent of human sinfulness, and instead the emphasis is placed squarely on the cleansing action of the Holy Spirit. However, in a work like *De Quantitate Animae*, in which the soul is understood to be an

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<sup>99</sup> The later Augustine will view desire as a form of love. Cf. John Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1938), 96ff.



active participant in its purification, Augustine is willing to argue that interior withdrawal is a viable means of transformation whereby the soul can attain the vision of God.

But while Augustine is more willing in *De Quantitate Animae* to suggest that the soul has the potential, by virtue of its power and greatness, to participate in the task of its purification and ascent to God, the fact remains that he places a great deal of emphasis in this early treatise on divine assistance, consistently emphasizing that the soul can only attain its goal with the help of God. Thus, although he grants more to the soul than he will in later works, his emphasis on the necessity of divine assistance throughout *De Quantitate Animae* demonstrates a recognition that the soul, while great, has weaknesses that can only be overcome through the help of God. Yet while Augustine refers to God's aid frequently prior to *De Quantitate Animae* 33.76 he does not provide concrete detail as to how such assistance works and what form it takes. In *De Quantitate Animae* 33.76, however, in a portion of the passage not yet quoted, Augustine does provide some detail in this regard, and in the process posits a conception of the role played by the church and by the incarnate Son of God in humanity's attainment of the vision of God that, while undeveloped, contains the starting point upon which his later thought will build. It is to this portion of *De Quantitate Animae* that I now turn.

*De Quantitate Animae 33.76: The Vision Placed Within a Distinctly Christian Framework*

I have already quoted from a portion of 33.76 above, in which Augustine, as was noted, describes "the very vision and contemplation of truth" attained by the ardent soul.<sup>100</sup> In the midst of this description of the joys of reaching the vision of God, he writes the following illuminating words regarding the church and the incarnate Son of

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<sup>100</sup> *QuAn.*, 33.76.

God, utilizing language that stands in contrast to the way in which the attainment of the vision had been described hitherto:<sup>101</sup>

Further, one may discern [when one attains the vision] how great a difference there is between these and the things that truly exist; and yet, since all the other things have also been created and have God as their Maker, they are wonderful and beautiful when considered by themselves, although in comparison with the things that truly exist, they are as nothing. Then shall we acknowledge how true are the things we have been commanded to believe, and how excellently we have been nurtured in perfect health by Mother Church, and how nourishing is that milk which the Apostle Paul declared he gave as drink to children. To take such food when one is fed by a mother is most proper; to do so when one is already grown would be shameful; to refuse it when needed would be regrettable; to find fault with it at any time or to dislike it would be wicked and impious; but to discuss it and communicate it in kindness betokens a wealth of goodness and charity.

We shall also see such great changes and transformations in this physical universe in observance of divine laws, that we hold even the resurrection of the body, which some believe with too many reservations and some do not believe at all, to be so certain that the setting of the sun is no greater certainty to us. Then, indeed, shall we condemn those who ridicule the assumption of human nature by the almighty, eternal, immutable Son of God as a warranty and as first fruits of our salvation, and His birth from a Virgin, and the other marvels of that historic account. We shall condemn them for acting like boys who, when they see <sup>an</sup> artist painting with other pictures set up before him so that he can follow them closely, cannot believe it possible to draw a man unless the painter looks at another picture.<sup>102</sup>

The first aspect of the above quotation that deserves attention is the language utilized by Augustine, for in this passage we see him employ specifically Christian terminology and ideas as he explains the attainment of the vision of God, language that stands in marked contrast to that used throughout most of *De Quantitate Animae*. For instance, there are very few references to scripture in *De Quantitate Animae*, and none of these references refer explicitly to the vision of God. In later treatises like *De Trinitate* Augustine will quote passages from scripture such as Matthew 5.8 – “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” – and 1 John 3.2 – “For we are God’s sons, and it has not yet been manifested what we shall be; we know that when he is manifested we

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<sup>101</sup> To illustrate where the quotation falls in relation to the earlier quotation provided above I have included part of this earlier quotation.

<sup>102</sup> *QuAn.*, 33.76.

shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is” – to illustrate that the Christian scriptures posit the attainment of the vision of God to be the goal of the Christian life.<sup>103</sup> No such passages are referred to explicitly or implicitly in *De Quantitate Animae*. Furthermore, scriptural language – that is, terms and themes found in scripture – is rarely used by Augustine when describing the first six levels of the soul’s greatness, or indeed in other chapters of *De Quantitate Animae*. For example, he only makes use of the word ‘sin’<sup>104</sup> to denote the vices of the soul that drag it down so “that the soul of a brute animal is to be preferred to it or even compared with it” three times;<sup>105</sup> twice in chapter thirty-four and once in chapter thirty-six. Rather than referring to sin and human sinfulness, Augustine depicts the human dilemma throughout most of *De Quantitate Animae*, as noted above, in terms with which Plotinus would have been familiar; that is to say, the fundamental problem for the soul is described by Augustine as attachment to corporeality. And, as also described above, the means of transcending this attachment – i.e., interiority and ascent – is depicted largely in Neoplatonic terms, save for Augustine’s references to the necessity of divine assistance.

Were one not to read the portion of *De Quantitate Animae* 33.76 quoted above, the paucity of scriptural quotations and language throughout most of *De Quantitate Animae*, and particularly in Augustine’s account of the first six levels of the soul’s greatness, could lead one to assume that, other than his emphasis on the necessity of divine assistance, he relies more on Neoplatonic mystical philosophy than on specifically Christian ideas and terminology in his formulation of the attainment of the vision of God.

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<sup>103</sup> Cf. *De Trin.*, I.7. He writes: “Contemplation in fact is the reward of faith, a reward for which hearts are cleansed through faith, as it is written, *cleansing their hearts through faith* (Acts 15.9). Proof that it is the contemplation for which hearts are cleansed comes from the key text, *Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God* (Mt 5.8).” Augustine’s conception of the vision of God in *De Trinitate* will be examined in greater detail in chapter three below.

<sup>104</sup> He uses both the noun *peccatus* and the verb *pecco* in this chapter. I have taken the Latin from *Saint Augustine: De Quantitate Animae: The Measure of the Soul – Latin Text with English Translation*, Francis E. Tournier, translator (Philadelphia: Peter Reilly Company, 1933).

<sup>105</sup> *QuAn.*, 34.77.

In the pages preceding this passage no references are made to the Son of God or to the efficacy of the incarnation, no references are made to the church or to the role of the church in guiding believers to the vision of God, and no references are made to the resurrection of the body. Yet in the midst of describing the “delights,” the “enjoyment” and the “everlasting peace” found in the attainment of the vision of God, we find Augustine introducing these Christian concepts and ideas.<sup>106</sup> At the very climax of his discussion on the seven levels of the soul’s ascent to God, which really marks the climax of *De Quantitate Animae* itself, the church and the incarnate Son of God are significantly introduced into the drama of the ascent.

The fact that both the church and the Son of God find their introduction in the climax of the treatise is surely not accidental. We must remember that Augustine was a skilled rhetorician who taught rhetoric prior to his conversion to Christianity.<sup>107</sup> As one practiced in the art of rhetoric Augustine recognized the immense importance of words and phrases within the context of a discussion, and consequently he would not have been prone to the insertion of words haphazardly. Accordingly, one might well argue, as I will below, that Augustine had a distinct purpose in introducing specifically Christian terminology and concepts in 33.76, for in so doing he unequivocally places the pathway of ascent to the vision of God within a Christian context, positing an understanding of the attainment of the vision that expands upon and defines his conception of divine assistance by emphasizing the fundamental importance of the church and the incarnation. Indeed, it would appear that earlier references to the necessity of God’s help foreshadow what he will write here in 33.76 regarding the role of the church and the incarnate Son of God in

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 33.76.

<sup>107</sup> Augustine describes himself in *Confessiones* as having been a “professor of rhetoric.” Cf. *Conf.*, VI.7.11. In a recent monograph Jaroslav Pelikan devotes a chapter to Augustine’s skill as a rhetorician, arguing that he occupies a “unique position in the history of rhetoric” as one who had “a practiced eye for gauging the reaction of audiences and their ‘frame of mind.’” See *Divine Rhetoric: The Sermon on the Mount as Message and as Model in Augustine, Chrysostom, and Luther* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 60 and 63.

guiding the believer to the vision of God. And in the process of developing and defining what he means by divine assistance, Augustine puts forward an approach to the attainment of the vision that has as its basis humility; a humility that stands in sharp contrast to the pride of those like the Neoplatonists who place too much emphasis upon the abilities of the soul.

*The Role of 'Mother Church' in the Attainment of the Vision of God*

Augustine's emphasis on humility emerges clearly from his brief exposition on "Mother Church" to which we now turn. Referring to what one will experience when one attains the vision of God, he writes: "Then shall we acknowledge how true are the things we have been commanded to believe, and how excellently we have been nurtured in perfect health by Mother Church, and how nourishing is that milk which the Apostle Paul declared he gave as drink to children."<sup>108</sup> This is a significant statement, for in it Augustine demonstrates his understanding that the ascent to the attainment of the vision of God takes place within an ecclesiastical framework, and furthermore, that he understands the process of ascent advocated in the first six levels of the soul's greatness to be characterized by the humility of submitting oneself to the teaching and nurturing of the community of the church. That is to say, this statement demonstrates that Augustine does not envisage the path of ascent, outlined in the first six levels of the soul's greatness, to take place apart from the church, but rather that the ascent to the vision of God occurs because of the teaching and nurturing of Mother Church.

With regards to Augustine's references to the teachings of the church, whereby we are taught that which we are "commanded to believe," the implicit suggestion being made is that the soul is not able to ascend to the divine solely by its own power, but must submit to the authority of the church to be taught about eternal realities which are not,

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<sup>108</sup> *QuAn.*, 33.76.

because of the soul's weaknesses, seen and thus understood at the present time.<sup>109</sup> That is to say, because we are not capable of contemplating divine realities by our own power, Augustine suggests that we are to be content "to believe" that which the church commands us to believe regarding eternal realities until we become capable of seeing them. Such submission to the authority of the church, a submission that is an implicit acknowledgement of weakness, requires humility, and while Augustine never explicitly refers to humility in *De Quantitate Animae*, it appears clear from this reference to the church in 33.76 that the concept is here implicitly. When we attain the vision of God, an attainment that does not occur apart from the church, we will, he writes, come to acknowledge the veracity of that which the church has taught for we shall see God as he is and will therefore come to the direct knowledge of that which has previously only been believed. Until such time, however, believers are humbly to acknowledge their own weakness, submitting themselves to the church to be fed with spiritual milk, milk which is given to those who are, in St Paul's words taken from the passage referred to by Augustine above, "still of the flesh."<sup>110</sup> Augustine appears, therefore, to suggest in 33.76 that the starting point for the attainment of the vision of God is humility, and that this humility is made manifest through submission to the teachings of the church whereby we believe what we do not, as yet, see.

Furthermore, Augustine writes that when the vision of God is attained we will recognize, not only the veracity of the church's teaching, but also "how excellently we have been nurtured in perfect health by Mother Church."<sup>111</sup> This reference to the nurturing role of the church seems to imply that the church plays an important role in guiding believers along the pathway of ascent to the vision of God, and that it is within

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 3.1-3a: "And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh."

<sup>111</sup> *QuAn.*, 33.76.

the context of the church that believers are transformed so as to become capable of attaining the vision of God even in this life. However, Augustine does not here elaborate on how exactly the church nurtures believers so as to attain the vision of God. Submission to the church requires humility, as noted above, and by implication the community of the church is not to be characterized by the pride of the philosophers. While precise definition as to how the church provides the context and the means of attaining the vision of God is not found in *De Quantitate Animae* 33.76, Augustine does provide the reader with some intimations in the last sentence of the first paragraph from 33.76 quoted above, as well as within a passage from chapter thirty-four.

After referring to the spiritual milk provided by the church to believers in 33.76, Augustine writes the following regarding how this food is to be received by the faithful: “To take such when one is fed by a mother is most proper; to do so when one is already grown would be shameful; to refuse it when needed would be regrettable; to find fault with it at any time or to dislike it would be wicked and impious; but to discuss it and communicate it in kindness betokens a wealth of goodness and charity.”<sup>112</sup> It is this latter part of the quotation that is especially important for our purposes, for it is in this clause that Augustine provides the reader with a brief glimpse into his conception of the inner workings of the church; that is, the way in which the church lives and functions in this world. And in so doing, he provides some explication – although not as detailed as will be found in his later works – with regards to how the church provides the context in which believers are transformed and the vision of God is attained.

Augustine appears to posit here that, not only are the church’s teachings important, but the means by which those teachings are communicated, received, and shared are also important. The spiritual milk which nourishes believers who are as yet incapable of attaining the contemplation of eternal things is communicated and discussed within an

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

atmosphere, Augustine argues, that is characterized by “kindness.”<sup>113</sup> The church, he seems to suggest, commands her humble followers to believe that which they do not understand, but it does so, not through methods of coercion and hate, but in a manner that both exudes and elicits love. And in so doing, believers continue to share with each other, in the confines of the church, the food given them by the church, doing so lovingly. The result of such loving communication, he writes, is that the church becomes a place in which “a wealth of goodness and charity” reside, and in which believers are nurtured until they can attain the vision for which they long.<sup>114</sup>

The concrete manifestation of this goodness and charity is made more explicit by Augustine in chapter thirty-four in which he argues that nothing is to be adored by the soul except God, who alone surpasses the soul’s greatness. In the latter paragraphs of this chapter he moves away from this discussion of God’s greatness briefly to describe how believers are to relate one to another, serving God by serving one another. After referring to Matthew 4.10 – “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him” – Augustine writes the following:

Let us realize, however, that as far as is possible and commanded, we must give assistance to souls of our own kind struggling in error, and realize, too, that when this is done properly, God is acting through us. And let us not arrogate anything to ourselves as our own, deceived by a desire for empty glory, for by this one evil we are plunged from the heights to the depths. And let us hate, not those who are crushed by vices, but the vices themselves; not sinners, but just sins.<sup>115</sup> We should indeed be willing to help everyone, even those who have harmed us or wish to harm us or wish at least that harm befall us. This is true religion, this alone is religion; and it is through this instrument that reinstatement with God has to do with the greatness of soul which we are examining and which makes it worthy of freedom. For He frees from all things whom it is most useful for all to serve, and to be content in whose service is perfect freedom – the only freedom.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> This is the one of two passages in *De Quantitate Animae*, as I mentioned above, in which Augustine refers specifically to sin.

<sup>116</sup> *QuAn.*, 34.78.



True religion, the religion that Augustine views as the means by which the soul is transformed once again to realize its greatness, and so be reinstated with God, consists in service to him, and this service manifests itself in submission one to another. Augustine writes here that those who struggle are to be lifted up by those who are strong, and that all are to be helped whether they be our enemies or our friends. Moreover, believers are not to appropriate or usurp anything to themselves for fear of the pride, although Augustine does not specifically use this word, that comes through seeking after “empty glory.”<sup>117</sup> The implication of this statement seems to be that one’s possessions and gifts are to be shared with all, and therefore that the community of the church is to be characterized by the humility of continual mutuality. Members of this community are not to look at their fellow human beings with hatred, but are to help fellow believers overcome their sins within an atmosphere of kindness and charity.

It is within such a community, characterized by goodness and charity, that Augustine suggests the ascent to the vision of God is made, and this emphasis on the role of community further differentiates his conception of the attainment of the vision from that of the Neoplatonists. As shall be seen in the next chapter when the role of community in Augustine’s conception of the vision of God is explored in greater detail, the Neoplatonists tended to emphasize individual attainment of the vision with little or no regard for the progress or status of one’s fellow human beings. Although Augustine will develop his conception of the role of the church community in the attainment of the vision of God in greater detail in *Confessiones* and *De Trinitate*, it is clear from *De Quantitate Animae* that, at this early post-conversion stage of his career, he recognized that the vision of God cannot be attained apart from true religion manifest in the goodness and charity of the community of the church. The divine assistance consistently mentioned throughout *De Quantitate Animae* is given some concrete form by Augustine

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

in 33.76 and 34.78, for, he suggests, it is by the assistance we give others that “God is acting through us” to guide believers along the path to the vision of God, a path that is trodden upon by the humble who serve others.<sup>118</sup> It is in the church that all recognize their weakness, that all understand the necessity of divine assistance and the folly of placing too great a faith in the soul’s ability given the fact that, despite its greatness, it has weakened itself through its attachment to temporal things. It is in the context of the church that the soul is gradually strengthened, Augustine suggests, and it is in the church that the soul prepares for the attainment of the vision of God in this life.

However, exactly how this works is not fully developed by Augustine. If the human dilemma is marked by the soul’s inordinate attachment to temporal things, how does participation in the community of the church aid in curing this unfortunate state? Part of the answer lies in the juxtaposition Augustine makes between pride and humility, although as I have reiterated frequently above, he never utilizes these terms in *De Quantitate Animae*. Pride appears to be connected to the soul’s attachment to temporal things in Augustine’s mind in that the soul’s attachment to these things is caused by the desire of the soul to appropriate these things to itself, but such an idea is not fully developed in the treatise. If pride is connected to the human dilemma, then the church aids in the transformation of the believer in that it is a community in which humility prevails, and believers learn not to trust their own abilities but to rely on the assistance provided by God through the guidance of others. In later writings, especially in *De Trinitate* which will be examined below, Augustine will provide a detailed explanation as to how the church provides the means whereby the soul’s disordered love is reordered in the context of a community that is characterized by the humble love which is both from and is the Holy Spirit. While Augustine nowhere refers to the Holy Spirit in *De Quantitate Animae*, it could be argued that what we find in *De Trinitate* is found in *De*

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

*Quantitate Animae*, albeit in nascent form. Because Augustine understands inordinate desire to be a key component of the soul's attachment to corporeal things, the role the church plays consists of providing the means and the context whereby this inordinate desire is transformed into a humble love of the other. However, such connections are not explicitly made by Augustine, and while my reading of his ecclesiology in *De Quantitate Animae* may be plausible, to interpret his thought as such requires a certain degree of conjecture due to the fact that his ecclesiological ruminations are not fully developed in *De Quantitate Animae*. That the church plays a role in the attainment of the vision of God is clear, but exactly what that role consists of is not precisely defined. Nevertheless, it would not be inappropriate to suggest that his understanding of the church's role in the attainment of the vision of God in *De Quantitate Animae* serves as an adequate foundation upon which he will build his later ecclesiological formulations.

*The Resurrection of the Body, the Incarnation, and the Ascent of the Soul*

It is after his reference to 'Mother Church' in 33.76 that Augustine moves on to discuss the resurrection of the body and the "assumption of human nature" by the Son of God.<sup>119</sup> That both of these important theological ideas are included in a passage on the attainment of the vision of God is significant, but as was the case with Augustine's ecclesiology in *De Quantitate Animae*, neither of these ideas is fully developed in such a way as to give the reader a clear understanding of how each relates to humanity's ascent to the divine. Nevertheless, as was also the case with his ecclesiology, his Christological musings in 33.76 present a conception of the role of the incarnate Son in humanity's ascent to God which, although undeveloped, provide a foundation upon which he will develop notions found in his later works.

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 33.76.

He begins the paragraph in which he mentions the incarnation of the Son of God with a sentence regarding the resurrection of the body, and it is this conception that I wish to examine first. Once we attain the vision of God, Augustine writes, we will arrive at complete knowledge regarding the veracity of the doctrine of the resurrection of the body which is taught by the church. There are some who believe this doctrine reservedly, and there are others who do not believe it at all, but through the attainment of the vision all doubts will be erased regarding its truthfulness. However, exactly how the resurrection of the body relates to the vision of God is not made clear. As well, throughout *De Quantitate Animae* Augustine demonstrates that he works within a dualism that is not unlike that of the Neoplatonists whereby we find him arguing that the vision of God can be attained through the soul “sloughing off the body”<sup>120</sup> making itself thereby “independent, as far as it can, of the body.”<sup>121</sup> How the resurrection of the body fits into an ontological dualism like that of Augustine in *De Quantitate Animae* is not fully explicated in this treatise. In *De Civitate Dei*, completed forty years after *De Quantitate Animae*, Augustine recognizes the paradoxical nature of affirming the resurrection of the body while at the same time holding to a dualistic cosmology, and consequently devotes much of the final book – book XXII – to addressing this problem.<sup>122</sup> He makes no such effort in *De Quantitate Animae*, but is willing simply to posit the veracity of the doctrine of the body’s resurrection.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Augustine lays a great deal of emphasis upon this doctrine, and it appears that this emphasis is related to his conception of the incarnation which is discussed immediately after his reference to the certainty of the resurrection. “Then, indeed,” he writes, “shall we condemn those who ridicule the assumption of human nature by the almighty, eternal, immutable Son of God as a warranty and as first

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 33.73.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 28.54.

<sup>122</sup> Cf. *CD* XXII.11-21.

fruits of our salvation, and His birth from a Virgin, and the other marvels of that historic account.”<sup>123</sup> There are those, Augustine writes, who understand Christian belief in the incarnation to be ridiculous and who therefore openly criticize this doctrine. He does not explicitly define who these opponents of Christianity are here as he will do in later writings. For instance, in *De Civitate Dei* Augustine singles out the Neoplatonists, and specifically Porphyry, for ridiculing the notion of God-made-flesh, and argues that “it was because of pride that Porphyry did not understand this great mystery.”<sup>124</sup> According to Augustine, pride prevented Porphyry as well as other philosophers from believing that the incorporeal God had become corporeal in the person of Jesus Christ for such a notion, he writes, indicates both that God is humble and that the way of ascent is characterized by humility.

Such explicit condemnation of specific individuals for allowing their ‘pride’ to prevent them from accepting the humility of God is not to be found in *De Quantitate Animae*. Nevertheless, Augustine’s description of the incarnation in 33.76 does hint at this idea. For, as shall be seen, Augustine juxtaposes the divinity and the humanity of Christ in such a way that, while he does not specifically refer to God as humble, the concept is there in nascent form. And by emphasizing the humility of Christ, at least implicitly, Augustine once again posits a conception of the attainment of the vision of God that is characterized by a humility that recognizes the necessity of divine assistance and is willing to accept that this assistance is made possible by the humble descent of God into the created realm.

This conception of divine humility appears implicitly, as already noted, in the way in which Augustine juxtaposes the divinity and the humanity of the incarnate Son of God. The Son of God is, he writes, “almighty, eternal, [and] immutable.”<sup>125</sup> By portraying the

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> *CD* X.24.

<sup>125</sup> *QuAn.*, 33.76.

Son as ‘almighty’ Augustine is emphasizing that he is, in his essence, all-powerful, and by referring to him as ‘eternal’ and ‘immutable’ Augustine is calling attention to his conception that the Son is above the created order in that he is not temporal nor is he corruptible. Throughout the whole of *De Quantitate Animae* Augustine always predicates eternity, incorruptibility, and power to God who is alone “the unchanging Source, unchanging Wisdom, [and the] unchanging Love.”<sup>126</sup> That Augustine predicates unlimited power, eternity, and incorruptibility only to the divine elsewhere indicates that he is, in 33.76, unequivocally positing the divinity of the Son of God, suggesting, though he does not do so explicitly, that the Son is equal to God and indeed God himself.

This understanding of the Son’s divinity, however, is contrasted by Augustine with the idea that the divine Son assumed human nature and so entered the drama of human history. The all-powerful nature of the Son of God is thus juxtaposed with the idea that he entered the created world as a powerless baby born “from a Virgin.”<sup>127</sup> And the Son’s eternity and incorruptibility is contrasted with his “assumption of human nature,” and thus his emergence into a temporal and corruptible world as a temporal and corruptible human being.<sup>128</sup> He who is above the created order himself entered createdness “as a warranty and as first fruits of our salvation.”<sup>129</sup>

The emphasis, therefore, in Augustine’s portrayal of the incarnation appears to be on the self-emptying nature of the Son of God’s ‘assumption of human nature,’ for although Augustine does not himself explicitly refer to the incarnation as such, the implication of his description of the incarnation is that the ‘almighty, eternal, and incorruptible’ God, in the words of St Paul, “emptied himself” in order to take “the form

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 34.77. It is in this chapter in particular that the attributes of God are discussed, and my point is that the attributes predicated of God in this chapter are of similar nature to that predicated of the Son of God in 33.76.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. Precisely what Augustine means by these two concepts will be explored in greater detail below.

of a slave.”<sup>130</sup> Consequently, it could be argued that Augustine is implicitly arguing in *De Quantitate Animae* 33.76 that God is himself humble, having assumed human nature for the salvation of humanity. However, as is the case with other ideas thus far examined in *De Quantitate Animae*, the concept of the humility of God, while there implicitly, is not as fully expressed or developed as we will find in his later works. For instance, we shall see below that in *Confessiones* and *De Trinitate* Augustine understands the humility of God, as demonstrated in the incarnation, to be a model for human imitation. Such a connection is not overtly made in *De Quantitate Animae*, although the fact that Augustine appears to exhort his readers to humility – as noted above – while at the same time formulating an understanding of the incarnation that seems to emphasize the humility of God indicates that these ideas, although not fully developed, are found in nascent form and are thus not foreign to his thought in these early post-conversion years.

However, while Augustine’s conception of the incarnation as the self-emptying act of the Son of God approximates his later emphasis on the humility of God, his understanding of the role of the incarnate Son in the attainment of the vision of God, as formulated in *De Quantitate Animae*, is far more ambiguous and indicates that this aspect of his thought is less developed than other aspects of his thought thus far examined. As noted above, when describing the efficacy of the Son’s assumption of human nature, Augustine refers to the incarnate Son “as a warranty and as first fruits of our salvation.”<sup>131</sup> Precisely what Augustine means by these two ideas is not clear, however, given that this description of the incarnate Son follows the sentence in which the resurrection of the body is emphasized, and given that Christ is referred to as ‘first fruits’ by St Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 specifically with reference to the resurrection of the

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<sup>130</sup> Philippians 2.7.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

dead,<sup>132</sup> it is likely that Augustine's reference to the Son as a 'warranty' and as 'first fruits' is related to humanity's resurrection now made possible by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.<sup>133</sup> However, because there is ambiguity surrounding how the resurrection of the body relates to the attainment of the vision of God, this same ambiguity overshadows Augustine's formulation of the role the incarnate Son plays in humanity's endeavour to achieve the vision. It can safely be argued that, because the incarnate Son is referred to within the context of Augustine's description of the attainment of the vision in 33.76, the Son is understood by Augustine to play a role in this attainment.

But despite this lack of clarity in Augustine's formulation of this role, he does set the stage for his later Christological ruminations. As shall be discussed in the next chapter the notion of Christ as the 'mediator' between temporality and eternity becomes increasingly important in Augustine's conception of the role of Christ in the attainment of the vision of God, but for reasons not entirely understood he does not refer to Christ as such until 394/5, approximately seven years after the composition of *De Quantitate Animae*.<sup>134</sup> Nevertheless, although Augustine never refers to Christ as 'mediator' in *De Quantitate Animae* his emphasis on the incarnate Son as both human and divine could lend itself to an understanding of the Son as the mediator between humanity and God.

### **Conclusion – *De Quantitate Animae*: A Foundation for Later Conceptions of the Vision of God**

In chapter thirty-four of *De Quantitate Animae* Augustine tells us that, in chapter thirty-three, he has provided a full account of "how great is the power and capacity of the

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<sup>132</sup> Cf. 1 Corinthians 15.20: "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died."

<sup>133</sup> Although I should note that the resurrection of Christ is not actually referred to by Augustine in *De Quantitate Animae* 33.76.

<sup>134</sup> Cf. Olivier Du Roy, *L'intelligence de la foi en la trinité selon saint Augustin: Genèse de sa théologie trinitaire jusqu'en 391* (Paris : Études Augustiniennes, 1966), note 3 on p. 89.



soul.”<sup>135</sup> Yet when he attempts to provide a summary of what he has just written he begins, not to speak of the soul’s greatness, but rather to expound on the fact that the “human soul is not what God is,”<sup>136</sup> and further, that “God alone is to be adored by the soul, since He alone is its Maker.”<sup>137</sup> It is not surprising that Augustine in chapter thirty-four moves away from the soul’s greatness in order to praise the “one God, true and perfect, who never was not, never will not be, never was other, never will be other than He is” given the conception of the attainment of the vision of God that emerges from the pages of the preceding chapter.<sup>138</sup>

For, as was noted above, while Augustine unashamedly borrows from the Neoplatonists to formulate his conception of the attainment of the vision, especially with regards to the necessity of interiority, he does so without compromising the specifically Christian emphases that he wants to express. John Rist accurately describes the influence of Neoplatonism on the young Augustine: “Reading Plotinus taught him to be no slavish disciple but to create a Platonism of his own, while retaining important Plotinian themes...when he found they could be harmonized with Scripture and Catholic tradition.”<sup>139</sup> Augustine clearly found Neoplatonism “inspiring and compelling,” but *De Quantitate Animae* demonstrates that the measuring stick for evaluating the truthfulness of Neoplatonic ideas was the Christian tradition.<sup>140</sup>

Thus, while Augustine is willing in *De Quantitate Animae* to write of the soul’s abilities in terms not found in his later writings, he does so only to the extent that the reader recognizes that, while one can speak of the power and capacity of the soul, it cannot attain the supreme vision of God apart from divine assistance. And as *De*

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<sup>135</sup> *QuAn.*, 34.77.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.78.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.77.

<sup>139</sup> “Plotinus and Christian Philosophy,” *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus*, Lloyd P. Gerson, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 406.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

*Quantitate Animae* 33.76 demonstrates, such divine assistance is accessed within the context of the church – in which is practiced the true religion “by which the soul binds itself again to the one and only God and reconciles itself to Him from whom it had torn itself away”<sup>141</sup> – and through the incarnation of the Son of God. Augustine’s emphasis in *De Quantitate Animae* is not so much on the soul’s greatness as is it on the means by which God guides and assists the soul to attain the greatness which it has compromised through its attachment to corporeal things.

Admittedly, there are some ambiguities in Augustine’s thought in *De Quantitate Animae*, particularly with regards to the role of the church and of Christ in humanity’s ascent to the vision of God, and I have endeavoured to highlight these above. But in the process of examining these ambiguities I have also sought to demonstrate that, while these ideas are not fully developed, they do contain, in nascent form, concepts and themes that will prove to be invaluable to his later understanding of the role the church and Christ plays in the attainment of the vision. Consequently, Augustine’s formulation of the ascent to the vision in *De Quantitate Animae* should be understood as providing a foundation for his later ruminations on the vision of God. As shall be demonstrated in subsequent chapters, while he will reject some ideas found in *De Quantitate Animae*, such as the potentiality of the soul and the necessity of interior withdrawal, he will largely build upon ideas expressed in this early treatise as he reflects upon the attainability of the vision of God.

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<sup>141</sup> *QuAn.*, 36.80.

**Chapter 2**  
**Confessiones and the Vision of God:**  
**The Mediating Role of Christ and the Necessity of the Ecclesiastical Community**

‘Your right hand upheld me’ (Ps. 17.36; 62.9) in my Lord, the Son of man who is mediator between you the One and us the many, who live in a multiplicity of distractions by many things; so ‘I might apprehend him in whom also I am apprehended’ (Phil. 3.12-14). And leaving behind the old days I might be gathered to follow the One, ‘forgetting the past’ and moving not towards those future things which are transitory but to ‘the things which are before’ me, not stretched out in distraction but extended in reach, not by being pulled apart but by concentration. So I ‘pursue the prize of the high calling’ where I ‘may hear the voice of praise’ and ‘contemplate your delight’ (Ps. 25.7; 26.4) which neither comes nor goes. But now ‘my years pass in groans’ (Ps. 30.11) and you, Lord, are my consolation. You are my eternal Father, but I am scattered in times whose order I do not understand. The storms of incoherent events tear to pieces my thoughts, the inmost entrails of my soul, until that day when, purified and molten by the fire of your love, I flow together to merge into you.<sup>1</sup>

**Introduction**

*De Quantitate Animae* contains the theological conjectures of a newly converted Christian enthusiastic about his new-found faith and about the possibility of attaining the vision of God through divine assistance and through the powers with which the soul was created. This treatise demonstrates Augustine’s early optimism about the possibility of attaining the vision of God in this life, and as was noted above, it appears that this optimism is connected to his suggestion that the soul’s attachment to corporeal things – an attachment caused by its misplaced desire for these things – is not overly detrimental to the soul for, through divine assistance, the determined soul can transcend this attachment and so ascend to the vision of God in which it will experience delight, enjoyment, peace, and knowledge hitherto unknown. According to Augustine, interior withdrawal, whereby the soul moves inwardly so as to direct its gaze away from the corporeal and toward the incorporeal, is an integral aspect of the soul’s purification and ascent to God, but as was noted above, *De Quantitate Animae* 33.76 illustrates that Augustine is concerned to place the attainment of the vision squarely within a Christian

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<sup>1</sup> *Conf.*, XI.29.39.

context. As such, in the midst of describing the soul's vision of God he refers to the nurturing role of 'Mother Church' and to the incarnation of the Son of God thus indicating that both the church and Jesus Christ play a role in guiding the soul in its quest toward the attainment of the vision in this life. And while these aspects of his thought are relatively undeveloped in comparison to what we find in his later works, they do contain in nascent form ideas and emphases that will be developed as his career progresses.

Of all his early post-conversion writings, no other writing provides such an admirable glimpse of Augustine's early conception of the vision of God than *De Quantitate Animae*. After the composition of *De Quantitate Animae* in 387, the next major writing in which Augustine devotes significant attention to the vision of God is *Confessiones*, completed approximately ten years after *De Quantitate Animae*, sometime between 397 and 401. It contains the autobiographical reflections of a mature Christian who had been consecrated bishop of Hippo Regius in northern Africa only a few years before its composition. In this work Augustine invites his readers to listen in, as it were, to his confession to God<sup>2</sup> as he recounts his journey towards the attainment of truth. We are guided as readers into the drama of this journey, from his experiment with the Manicheans through to his discovery of Neoplatonism and finally to his eventual conversion to Christianity and his decision to return to Africa to live the devout life. For our purposes, two of the most important events chronicled in *Confessiones* are found in books VII and IX in which Augustine describes the visions he experienced in Milan and Ostia; the first occurring after reading the "books of the Platonists" prior to his conversion to Christianity, and the second occurring with his mother after his conversion and baptism.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. John J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine: An Introduction to the Confessions of St Augustine* (New York: Longman, 1980), 3.

They are important for our purposes because they provide a glimpse into Augustine's understanding of the attainment of the vision ten years after the composition of *De Quantitate Animae*.<sup>3</sup> This period of his life was marked by profound change. He was ordained a priest in 391 and consecrated bishop of Hippo in 396, and when not carrying out the duties involved with these offices, Augustine spent his time in study, and as Peter Brown points out, he devoted much of his time to the study of St Paul's epistles.<sup>4</sup> *Confessiones* demonstrates that in the decade since the composition of *De Quantitate Animae* Augustine's thought had developed in substantial ways, especially with regards to his understanding of the vision of God. In books VII and IX Augustine puts forward a conception of the vision's attainment which illustrates a profound evolution in his thought when compared to that found in *De Quantitate Animae*.

My analysis will consist of two main sections. In the first section I will begin by examining *Confessiones* VII.10.16 and VII.17.23 in which are found Augustine's account of two attempted ascents to the vision of God undertaken after his discovery of Neoplatonic philosophy, and this will be followed by an analysis of VII.18.24 in which Augustine posits the necessity of Jesus Christ as a mediator between God and humanity. The emphasis in this section, I will argue, is on the weakness of the soul caused by its prideful and inordinate love of created things, and this emphasis on the soul's weakness is coupled with a formulation of the mediating role of the incarnate Son that is more fully developed than what we found in *De Quantitate Animae*. In the second section I will examine *Confessiones* IX.10.23-25, and in this section I will argue that the emphasis here

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<sup>3</sup> Although the events of books VII and IX date prior to *De Quantitate Animae*, Augustine's observations and reflections regarding these events are those of a Christian bishop analyzing two very significant events in his life, and attempting to understand how they shaped his life. That these events actually occurred is not questioned here. That Augustine's description of the events, however, reflects the theological mindset of the bishop of Hippo is assumed.

<sup>4</sup> *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 144-145.

is on the role of the ecclesiastical community in the attainment of the vision which Augustine now understands to be fully attainable eschatologically.

### **Book VII: Unfulfilling Neoplatonic Ascents to God**

*Augustine's First Attempt at a Neoplatonic Ascent to God: Confessiones VII.10.16*<sup>5</sup>

In the first chapter of book VII Augustine describes the intellectual dilemma he suffered following his involvement with the Manicheans. Trying to conceive of God as incorporeal, Augustine found himself unable to conceive of him as anything but corporeal: “Although you [God] were not in the shape of the human body, I nevertheless felt forced to imagine something physical occupying space diffused either in the world or even through infinite space outside the world.”<sup>6</sup> Tied to materiality, he was incapable of contemplating anything but material, corporeal things.<sup>7</sup> Yet, in the midst of this intellectual difficulty, Augustine tells us that God had mercy on him, and placed into his hands “some books of the Platonists, translated from Greek into Latin.”<sup>8</sup> Augustine suggests that there was much in these books that coincided with Christian theology, specifically with regards to the Word of God spoken of in the opening verses of John’s gospel, and *Confessiones* VII.9.13-15 contains his ruminations on this subject.

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<sup>5</sup> Scholars are divided regarding the number of attempts Augustine describes in book VII. Pierre Courcelle argues that there are three separate descriptions of three “vaines tentatives d’extases plotiniennes,” viewing VII.20.26 as one such description; cf. *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Éditions E. De Boccard, 1968), 160-165. James J. O’Donnell disagrees with Courcelle’s assessment, arguing instead that VII.10.16 and VII.17.23 describe two separate attempts at a Plotinian ascent with VII.20.26 being a summary chapter; cf. *Confessions II: Commentary on Books 1-7* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 435. My own view more closely approximates that of O’Donnell. VII.20.26 clearly reads as a summary of what has already been described in VII.10.16 and VII.17.23. To view it as describing another attempt at a Plotinian ascent appears unnecessary, and indeed, does not appear to find warrant in the text itself. Therefore, the bulk of my examination of Augustine’s conception of the vision of God in book VII will largely be concerned with VII.10.16 and VII.17.23, though reference will occasionally be made to VII.20.26 when necessary.

<sup>6</sup> *Conf.*, VII.1.1.

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, VII.7.11.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, VII.9.13.

*Confessiones* VII.10.16, however, begins on a different note as Augustine ventures away from his comparison of Neoplatonism and Christianity in order to describe how these Platonic books affected him spiritually. “By the Platonic books,” Augustine writes, “I was admonished to return into myself;”<sup>9</sup> and so begins his first attempt at a Neoplatonic-inspired ascent to the vision of God. Previously unable to contemplate incorporeal things, the Neoplatonists exhorted him to look within and focus upon the incorporeality of the soul, for, as Plotinus argues, it is only when the soul directs its gaze toward its incorporeal self that the eye of the soul can be trained to gaze upon the divine light. Thus exhorted Augustine withdrew into himself, and in so doing he saw “the immutable light” with the eye of his soul.<sup>10</sup> This light, Augustine emphasizes, was “utterly different from all our kinds of light,”<sup>11</sup> for the source of this light, and in fact, the light itself, was God who created all things.<sup>12</sup>

However, although Augustine tells us that he was able to attain a tenuous glimpse of the divine light, the outcome of this vision was not the union with the divine suggested by Plotinus, nor did it approximate the joyful contemplation of truth, whereby the soul receives “delights” and “everlasting peace,” described in such detail by Augustine in *De Quantitate Animae*.<sup>13</sup> Far from evoking joy and peace, the vision only made him realize the vast difference separating himself from God: “[Y]ou 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.”<sup>14</sup> Unaccustomed to the incorporeal divine light, Augustine was overwhelmed by his brief

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., VII.10.16.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.: “It transcended my mind, not in the way that oil floats on water, nor as heaven is above earth. It was superior because it made me, and I was inferior because I was made by it.”

<sup>13</sup> *QuAn.*, 33.76.

<sup>14</sup> *Conf.*, VII.10.16.

glimpse of the divine, and he came to the realization that he was, at that time, incapable of ascending to the type of vision he read of in the Neoplatonic writings which prompted him to withdraw interiorly in the first place. The vision he attains is not the fulfilling vision described by Plotinus,<sup>15</sup> but is tenuous, brief, and God is contemplated only from “far away.”<sup>16</sup>

*Augustine’s Second Attempt at a Neoplatonic Ascent to God: Confessiones VII.17.23*

The reasons why this vision fell so far short of Augustine’s expectations become clear later in book VII. Recalling his reaction to the failed attempt at ascent described in VII.10.16, Augustine writes the following in VII.17.23: “I was astonished to find that already I loved you, not a phantom surrogate for you. But I was not stable in the enjoyment of my God. I was caught up to you by your beauty and quickly torn away from you by my weight. With a groan I crashed into inferior things.”<sup>17</sup> Referring to Wisdom 9.15<sup>18</sup> Augustine alludes to the degree to which his inordinate attachment to corporeal things, including to his own mortal body, restrained him from attaining the goal of a sustaining vision of God in which he could persist in enjoyment of him. His brief glimpse of God elicited love for him, but such longing remained unfulfilled due to his

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<sup>15</sup> See for instance *Enn.* I.6.7: “Beholding this Being – the Chorus of all Existence, the Self-Intent that ever gives forth and never takes – resting, rapt, in the vision and possession of so lofty a loveliness, growing to Its likeness, what Beauty can the Soul yet lack? For This, the Beauty supreme, the absolute, and the primal, fashions Its lovers to Beauty and makes them also worthy of love. And for This, the sternest and the uttermost combat is set before the Souls; all our labour is for This, lest we be left without part in this noblest vision, which to attain is to be blessed in the blissful sight, which to fail of is to fail utterly.” See also IV.8.1 for a similar description of Plotinian ecstasy. My assessment that Augustine views his attempt at ascent in VII.10.16 as a failure is shared by Pierre Courcelle who describes this passage in the following terms: “La mémoire amoureuse qu’engendre cette expérience est surtout le regret de n’avoir pu se rassasier de la plénitude divine” (*Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin*. [Paris: E. De Boccard, 1968], 166). James J. O’Donnell also shares this assessment: “This paragraph presents Augustine seeking the ecstasy that Plotinus taught comes from the ascent of mind to union with highest being; this attempt ends in failure” (*Confessions II: Commentary on Books 1-7*, 435).

<sup>16</sup> *Conf.*, VII.10.16: “And you cried from far away: ‘Now, I am who I am’ (Exod. 3.14).”

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, VII.17.23.

<sup>18</sup> Wisdom of Solomon 9.14-15 reads as follows: “For the reasoning of mortals is worthless, and our designs are likely to fail; for a perishable body weighs down the soul, and this earthly tent burdens the thoughtful mind.”



attachment to created things. He was able to transcend this attachment for a brief instant, but the force of his entanglement proved to be too much. Torn away by the “weight” of his attachment, he was forced to return to his previous state of separation from God.<sup>19</sup>

But it would appear that Augustine did not, at the time immediately following his first attempt, believe that the ascent to God was an impossibility. His failed attempt at ascent demonstrated to him “the difficulty of approach, the likelihood of being repelled, and the need for moral purification if the approach is to be (more or less) successful,” but immediately after describing the reasons behind his apparent failure to sustain the vision of God, Augustine writes that he once again attempted an ascent to God.<sup>20</sup>

He writes of how he was, at the time of his second attempt at ascent, certain that God could be seen in creation, and that this certainty caused him to wonder how he was able to appreciate beauty in creation and also make judgements that enabled him to make correct decisions about why one thing should be a certain way and why another should not.<sup>21</sup> This line of questioning, Augustine writes, caused him once again to attempt an ascent to God through the interior withdrawal of the soul, and Augustine’s description of this attempt in VII.17.23 illustrates the vigour with which this attempt was made:

And so step by step I ascended from bodies to the soul which perceives through the body, and from there to its inward force, to which bodily senses report external sensations, this being as high as the beasts go. From there again I ascended to the power of reasoning to which is to be attributed the power of judging the deliverances of the bodily senses. This power, which in myself I found to be mutable, raised itself to the level of its own intelligence, and led my thinking out of the ruts of habit. It withdrew itself from the contradictory swarms of imaginative fantasies, so as to discover the light by which it was flooded. At that point it had no hesitation in declaring that the unchangeable is preferable to the changeable, and that on this ground it can know the unchangeable, since, unless it could somehow know this, there would be no certainty in preferring it to the mutable. So in the flash of a trembling glance it attained to that which is. At that moment I saw your ‘invisible nature understood through the things which are made’ (Rom. 1.20). But I did not possess the strength to keep my vision fixed. My weakness reasserted itself, and I

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., VII.17.23.

<sup>20</sup> James J. O’Donnell, *Confessions II: Commentary on Books I-7*, 442.

<sup>21</sup> *Conf.*, VII.17.23: “I asked myself why I approved of the beauty of bodies, whether celestial or terrestrial, and what justification I had for giving an unqualified judgement on mutable things, saying ‘This ought to be this, and that ought not to be thus.’”

returned to my customary condition. I carried with me only a loving memory and a desire for that of which I had the aroma but which I had not yet the capacity to eat.<sup>22</sup>

Unlike the attempt at ascent described in *Confessiones* VII.10.16, which appeared to be somewhat haphazard and clumsy, the attempt described above appears to be more organized and more directed. In VII.10.16, Augustine suggests that he simply thrust himself inwards and that this inward movement allowed him, however briefly, to catch a glimpse of the immutable light of God. In VII.17.23, however, we see Augustine moving inwardly “step by step.”<sup>23</sup> The influence of Plotinus is clearly evident, and indeed, there is a great deal of similarity between the above description of interior withdrawal and that advocated by Augustine in chapter thirty-three of *De Quantitate Animae*.<sup>24</sup> The inward movement from the senses through to the power of reason described in *Confessiones* VII.17.23 is found also in *De Quantitate Animae* where we find Augustine moving inwardly from the life-giving power of the soul – whereby the soul animates the body and through the senses preserves the body<sup>25</sup> - to the soul’s power of reason which surpasses the ability of “brute animals.”<sup>26</sup> Augustine writes in *Confessiones* that, through this interior withdrawal he was able to raise his “thinking out of the ruts of habit,” and by this phrase we are apparently to understand that he found himself able to transcend his attachment to the corporeal – that is, he was able to break free of the corporeal images which swarmed his mind – and this enabled him to direct his gaze to the divine light which is the source of all beauty and truth.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the similarities between *De Quantitate Animae* 33 and *Confessiones* VII.17.23 are clearly evident. However, one substantial difference separates the two

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> See James J. O’Donnell, *Confessions II: Commentary on Books 1-7*, 456.

<sup>25</sup> *QuAn.*, 33.70-71.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 33.71-72. Note the similarities in language between this section of *De Quantitate Animae* and *Confessiones* VII.17.23 where Augustine also speaks of moving toward a level beyond which “beasts” cannot go.

<sup>27</sup> *Conf.*, VII.17.23.

accounts. In *De Quantitate Animae*, he clearly understood the soul to be fully capable of success in the ascent and to be “free from all corruption and purified of all its stains.”<sup>28</sup> In *Confessiones* VII.17.23, however, while Augustine suggests that, through interior withdrawal, he was able to transcend his attachment to the corporeal to a certain degree, and that this purification resulted in an experience of vision, the vision to which he attained here was nothing more than a “trembling glance” of God’s invisible nature.<sup>29</sup> Lacking the strength to fix his gaze on the divine light for whom his soul longed, Augustine recoiled from the vision, forced once again to return to his attachment to the corporeal, and forced to recognize that he did not have the capacity to sustain the vision.

At the beginning of *Confessiones* VII.18.24, Augustine indicates that the brevity of the vision, his inability to sustain his vision of God, was disconcerting to him: “I sought a way to obtain strength enough to enjoy you,” he writes, indicating that he did not, at the time this vision occurred, think that he lacked the ability to gain the strength necessary to enjoy a sustained vision of God.<sup>30</sup> Having read the Neoplatonists, he would have been under the impression that the vision attained through interior withdrawal was something more than just a tenuous glimpse of the divine. Of course, he would not have been under the illusion that the attainment of the vision of God in the life could be permanent. Porphyry suggests that his teacher Plotinus attained a vision of God four separate times during his lifetime, thus indicating the impermanence of each experience.<sup>31</sup> And in *Ennead* VI.9.10 Plotinus himself questions why the vision of God must, of necessity, be transient in this life.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, certain passages indicate Plotinus’ contention that there is a possibility of attaining a vision of God of lasting, if not

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<sup>28</sup> *QuAn*, 33.74.

<sup>29</sup> *Conf.*, VII.17.23.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, VII.18.24.

<sup>31</sup> *ViPl.*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> “But how comes the soul not to keep that ground? Because it has not yet escaped wholly: but there will be the time of vision unbroken, the self hindered no longer by any hindrance of body.” Cf. note 25 on p. 127 of Henry Chadwick’s translation of *Confessiones*.

permanent, sustainability.<sup>33</sup> *De Quantitate Animae* 33.76 indicates that the early Augustine viewed the sustainability of the vision of God in a similar manner as the Neoplatonists. While he clearly did not understand the attainment of the vision of God in this life to be permanent, there is nothing in *De Quantitate Animae* to suggest that Augustine understood the vision to be anything but fulfilling. He writes nothing in *De Quantitate Animae* about the brevity, or tenuousness, of the vision, perhaps indicating that he understood the attainment of it to be sustained, nor does he write that the soul will feel anything but total fulfillment in the contemplation of God “no matter what degree of contemplation you reach.”<sup>34</sup>

#### *The Evolution of Augustine’s Understanding of Human Potentiality*

Augustine’s emphasis upon the transitory and unfulfilling nature of the vision of God in *Confessiones* VII.10.16 and VII.17.23, therefore, indicates something of an evolution in his thought regarding the attainment of the vision in this life, and in particular, they indicate an evolution in Augustine’s understanding of the effects of sin on human potentiality. In *Confessiones* Augustine writes a great deal more about sin, and the origins of sin in pride, than he did in *De Quantitate Animae*; indeed, as seen in the previous chapter, while sin and pride are alluded to briefly in *De Quantitate Animae*, neither are significant topics. There are, however, a number of passages in *Confessiones* which demonstrate Augustine’s conception of sin, and its detrimental effects on humanity, at the time the work was composed. For instance, after recounting his sins as a boy in book I, he writes the following to summarize his actions: “My sin consisted in this, that I sought pleasure, sublimity, and truth not in God but in his creatures, in myself and

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, *Enn.*, I.6.9. See also James J. O’Donnell, *Confessions II: Commentary on Books I-VII*, 436.

<sup>34</sup> *QuAn.*, 33.76.

other created beings. So it was that I plunged into miseries confusions, and errors.”<sup>35</sup> And in book II, Augustine suggests that this search for truth in himself and in other created things – a search which he suggests demonstrated his soul’s inordinate love for that which is not God – has its origins in pride: “So the soul fornicates (Ps. 72:27) when it is turned away from you and seeks outside you the pure and clear intentions which are not to be found except by returning to you. In their perverted way all humanity imitates you. Yet they put themselves at a distance from you and exalt themselves against you.”<sup>36</sup> Instead of receiving pleasure through physical objects and praising God for them, thus returning our love to God,<sup>37</sup> the prideful soul receives pleasure through created things and loves them as if they were the very property of that soul. God is not loved through the physical objects by the prideful soul. Rather, the physical objects are loved in and of themselves in order that the soul may receive its pleasure through them, rather than through God. Thus, in *Confessiones* Augustine posits pride to be a sin of misplaced love whereby the soul loves corporeal things and finds its enjoyment in these things apart from God, thereby causing the soul to stand against him instead of looking to him for its ultimate fulfillment.

The consequences of this pride, according to Augustine, are drastic. For by finding enjoyment in created things, by loving these created things in themselves without returning love to the creator, the soul becomes attached to these objects, “stuck in them and glued to them with love through the physical senses.”<sup>38</sup> In a number of passages in *Confessiones*, Augustine compares the effects of pride to the swelling of one’s cheeks which inevitably masks the sight of the eyes.<sup>39</sup> Attached to created things through its

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<sup>35</sup> *Conf.*, I.20.31.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, II.6.14.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, IV.17.18: “If physical objects give you pleasure, praise God for them and return love to their Maker lest, in the things that please you, you displease him.”

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.10.15.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, VII.7.11; VII.18.24.

inordinate love of them, the soul finds itself incapable of breaking free from this unnatural union in order to fix its gaze on God. Furthermore, physical objects do little else but “rend the soul with pestilential desires; for the soul loves to be in them and takes its repose among the objects of its love.”<sup>40</sup> The soul naturally seeks eternal rest and happiness, but it cannot attain true rest and happiness in created things because they “lack permanence.”<sup>41</sup> However, in its quest for repose the soul continues its attempts to find happiness through these created things, and as it does so, the soul becomes progressively more attached to these created things. And because, as Augustine stresses, only death can emerge through this love of created things, the soul’s natural desire for eternal happiness ironically becomes more and more unrealizable as it attempts to fulfill its desire through created things.<sup>42</sup> “I loved beautiful things of a lower order,” he writes to describe his early life, “and I was going down to the depths.”<sup>43</sup>

There are two aspects of this conception of the soul’s attachment to corporeal things in *Confessiones* which illustrate an evolution in Augustine’s thought since the composition of *De Quantitate Animae*. First, as mentioned above, while Augustine refers to the soul’s inordinate attachment to created things in *De Quantitate Animae*, he never explicitly refers to this attachment as being the consequence of pride or sin. It can, of course, be argued that this idea is to be found in a nascent form in that treatise. He does hint that the soul’s attachment to created things is a result of misplaced love.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, as argued above, Augustine appears to suggest, albeit implicitly, that humility lies at the heart of the soul’s attainment to the vision of God. Nevertheless, what was implicit in *De Quantitate Animae* is made explicit in *Confessiones* where the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., IV.10.15.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., IV.12.18: “There is no rest where you seek for it,” Augustine writes addressing the errant soul. “Seek for what you seek, but it is not where you are looking for it. You seek the happy life in the region of death; it is not there. How can there be a happy life where there is not even life?”

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., IV.13.20.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *QuAn.*, 33.73.

conception of prideful love as the source of the soul's inordinate attachment to created things is more thoroughly worked out and elaborated upon than was the case ten years earlier.

Second, whereas in *De Quantitate Animae* Augustine understood the soul's attachment to created things to be surmountable, his evaluation of the effects of this attachment in *Confessiones* is far more negative. The soul may find itself entangled in corporeality, Augustine suggests in *De Quantitate Animae*, but the soul has the ability, through the grace of God, to transcend this attachment – to “contemn all corporeal things”<sup>45</sup> – and so ascend to the vision of God in this life. The path may require intense labour, but release from corporeality is a goal attainable by the persevering soul. This is not the case in *Confessiones* in which Augustine stresses that the soul's attachment to created things is greatly detrimental to the soul's ability to contemplate eternal realities. While the soul may have the ability briefly to transcend this attachment and so attain a brief and tenuous glimpse of God, Augustine emphasizes in *Confessiones* VII.10.16 and VII.17.23 that the soul finds itself in a state of “weakness” due to its entanglement with the corporeal, and that this weakness causes the soul necessarily to recoil from the light of God.<sup>46</sup> There is, Augustine appears to suggest, a chasm separating the soul which is unnaturally attached to created things from the uncreated God, and this chasm prevents the soul from escaping its union with corporeality so as to ascend to God. According to Augustine, the soul lacks the strength needed to bridge this chasm separating God from humanity. Weakened humanity cannot ascend to God by its own strength. Thus, Augustine posits, God has descended to humanity and become weak himself, and in so doing, he has provided a means whereby the soul can ascend to the vision for which it

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<sup>45</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 3.4.

<sup>46</sup> *Conf.*, VII.17.23.

longs. It is to this conception of the incarnate Word as a mediator between God and humanity that we now turn.

*The Necessity of Jesus Christ as Mediator: Confessiones VII.18.24*

Disturbed and disappointed that his Neoplatonic attempts to ascend to the vision of God had resulted only in a brief glimpse of the divine, Augustine tells us that he sought for a means to gain the strength necessary to sustain his enjoyment of God, but that this quest ended in failure.<sup>47</sup> The reason for this failure, the bishop suggests in *Confessiones* VII.18.24, is that he did not recognize the necessity of the incarnation for the ascent of the soul. VII.18.24 deserves full quotation:

I sought a way to obtain strength enough to enjoy you; but I did not find it until I embraced ‘the mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus’ (1 Tim. 2.5), ‘who is above all things, God blessed forever’ (Rom. 9.5). He called and said ‘I am the way and the truth and the life’ (John 14.6). The food which I was too weak to accept he mingled with flesh, in that “The Word was made flesh’ (John 1.14), so that our infant condition might come to suck milk from your wisdom by which you created all things. To possess my God, the humble Jesus, I was not yet humble enough. I did not know what his weakness was meant to teach.

Your Word, eternal truth, higher than the superior parts of your creation, raises those submissive to him to himself. In the inferior parts he built for himself a humble house of our clay. By this he detaches from themselves those who are willing to be made his subjects and carries them across to himself, healing their swelling and nourishing their love. They are no longer to place confidence in themselves, but rather to become weak. They see at their feet divinity become weak by his sharing in our ‘coat of skin’ (Gen. 3.21). In their weariness they fall prostrate before this divine weakness which rises and lifts them up.<sup>48</sup>

As we see, Augustine opens the passage with a quotation from 1 Timothy 2.5, a verse not quoted in *De Quantitate Animae*, and indeed, not found in any writing previous to 394/5.<sup>49</sup> Augustine probably was familiar with this verse at the time he wrote *De Quantitate Animae*; he himself tells us in *Confessiones* that, prior to his conversion to Christianity he “seized the sacred writings of your Spirit and especially the apostle Paul”

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., VII.18.24.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Olivier Du Roy, *op. cit.*, note 3 on p. 89.



and did so “[w]ith avid intensity.”<sup>50</sup> But it would appear that he was somewhat unclear what to do with the idea of Jesus Christ as the “mediator between God and humankind.” In the one brief mention of Christ found in chapter thirty-three, Augustine refers to the incarnate Son as “a warranty” and as the “first fruits of our salvation,” but never as the mediator between God and humanity.<sup>51</sup> That he refers to the incarnate Son in the midst of describing the fulfillment of the soul’s ascent to the vision of God does suggest that he understood the Son to be, in some way, integral to this process of ascent. However, as the previous chapter illustrated, Augustine’s conception of the Son’s role in the soul’s ascent to God is not fully worked out.

Augustine’s emphasis on the necessity of Jesus Christ as the mediator between God and humanity in *Confessiones* VII.18.24 demonstrates that, in the ten years separating the composition of *De Quantitate Animae* and *Confessiones*, he has more fully developed the soteriological implications of the incarnation. Olivier Du Roy suggests that it was during this time that we have Augustine’s “découverte de Christ médiateur,”<sup>52</sup> and that this discovery was based upon a more careful reading of texts such as 1 Timothy 2.5, a text Du Roy characterizes as “un des textes les plus importants pour la christologie d’Augustin.”<sup>53</sup> By quoting 1 Timothy 2.5 at the beginning of his exposition on the necessity of the incarnation in *Confessiones* VII.18.24, Augustine suggests that the concept of Christ as a mediator is the prevailing category governing his understanding of the incarnate Son’s role in the ascent of the soul.

The question we must ask is this: How does Jesus Christ serve as the intermediary between God and humanity according to Augustine? The answer to this question lies in his conception of the incarnate Son as both divine and human. The man Christ Jesus is,

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<sup>50</sup> *Conf.*, VII.21.27.

<sup>51</sup> *QuAn.*, 33.76.

<sup>52</sup> *Op. cit.*, 88-95.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, note 3 on p. 89.

Augustine writes in the quotation provided above, “above all things, God blessed forever.”<sup>54</sup> He is the “eternal truth, higher than the superior parts of [God’s] creation” for he is the “wisdom by which [God] created all things.”<sup>55</sup> As creator the Son is not created but “eternal,” and is therefore above all created things.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the Word, Augustine suggests in the above quotation, is divine, united with God and, in fact, God himself.<sup>57</sup> Jesus Christ was not simply “a man of excellent wisdom which none could equal,”<sup>58</sup> as Augustine writes in *Confessiones* VII.19.25, but is the Word made flesh.<sup>59</sup> He is, according to Augustine, both God and human, both eternal and temporal, both uncreated and created, both the creator and a creature, and as all of these things, the incarnate Word is uniquely suited to act as the mediator between God and humanity. In *Confessiones* VII.17.23 and VII.18.24 Augustine likens the condition of the soul to that of an infant who is unable to eat solid food. The soul may be able to smell the aroma of the divine ‘food’ but it lacks “the capacity to eat” it.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, because humanity is too weak to ascend to the divine, Augustine suggests that the divine descended to humanity “so that our infant condition might come to suck milk from your wisdom by which you created all things.”<sup>61</sup> With the soul too attached to created things to redirect its gaze to the Uncreated, God “built for himself a humble house of our clay” and thus “mingled” his divinity with that which is created in order that humanity could contemplate and enjoy

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<sup>54</sup> *Conf.*, VII.18.24.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Cf. *ibid.* where Augustine refers to the “humble Jesus” as “my God.” It should be pointed out that this passage is not the only place where Augustine lays stress on the divinity of the Son. In other passages interspersed throughout *Confessiones* Augustine writes of the Son as being “equal to God and ‘God with God,’” (*ibid.*, X.43.68) who “immutably abides eternal with” the Father (*ibid.*, VII.9.14).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, VII.19.25.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, VII.18.24.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, VII.17.23.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, VII.18.24

the divine in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>62</sup> God has made himself acceptable and accessible to humanity through the incarnation.

Woven throughout his portrayal of the efficaciousness of the incarnation in *Confessiones* VII.18.24 is the theme of humility. God, Augustine suggests in this passage, is himself humble. He did not remain inaccessible to humanity, but humbly became weak so that we might be raised to him. According to Augustine, this divine act of humility teaches humanity that salvation is to be found through humility and not pride. To ‘embrace’ the mediator, to ‘possess’ God, requires an act of humility that runs counter to the prideful acts of which the soul has been guilty, and which have weakened the soul in the first place. Christ’s “weakness was meant to teach” humanity that the road of ascent is not characterized by faith in the inherent capabilities of the soul realized through interior withdrawal.<sup>63</sup> Rather, Augustine stresses in *Confessiones* VII.18.24 that the road of ascent is characterized by the humble submission of oneself to the temporal Word made flesh. Instead of directing our gaze inwardly, Augustine suggests that we are to direct our gaze to the “divine weakness” exemplified in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>64</sup> Weak and weary, humanity is to become “submissive” to the “humble Jesus,” and in so doing, humanity imitates the humility of God manifest in the incarnate Word.<sup>65</sup> Consequently, having united himself to humanity through the incarnation, the mediator “detaches from themselves those who are willing to be made his subjects and carries them across to himself, healing their swelling and nourishing their love.”<sup>66</sup> By this statement it would appear Augustine is suggesting that, through humanity’s humble submission to Christ, whereby the soul ceases to place confidence in itself and recognizes its weakness, the mediator works within a soul gradually to break the attachment it has to

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. See also *ibid.*, X.43.68.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

created things, healing the swelling caused by pride by nurturing the love of God where prideful love once ruled.

This reference to the nurturing or nourishing of love is surely not accidental, and is probably meant to be a veiled allusion to the work of the Holy Spirit, who is not referred to in *De Quantitate Animae*. In book XIII of *Confessiones* Augustine describes the Holy Spirit as the love which lifts humanity to the eternal enjoyment of God: “My weight is my love,” Augustine writes, and “by your gift,” referring here to the Holy Spirit, “we are set on fire and carried upwards: we grow red hot and ascend.”<sup>67</sup> “Love lifts us” to God, he declares, “and ‘your good Spirit’ (Ps. 142.10) exalts ‘our humble estate from the gates of death’ (Ps. 9, 15).”<sup>68</sup> Given this description of the Holy Spirit as love it could be argued that Augustine’s reference to the nourishing of love in *Confessiones* VII.18.24 suggests that the incarnate Word heals the soul’s attachment to created things by replacing the inordinate and prideful love the soul had for created things with the love of the Holy Spirit, which is the Holy Spirit itself. Through the Holy Spirit we learn to love rightly by loving God, who has revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ, above all things. Through the nourishment of love the eyes of the soul, which were closed because of pride, are gradually reopened until such time, Augustine writes, as those who have fallen prostrate in humility before Christ will be raised and lifted up by him who was raised and lifted up himself.<sup>69</sup> This understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit and the reordering of love, however, is found only in nascent form here in *Confessiones* VII.18.24, and indeed, is something only briefly touched on throughout the chapter. We will see in the next chapter, however, that the role of the Holy Spirit in bringing humanity to the vision of God is more fully developed in *De Trinitate*.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., XIII.9.10.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., VII.18.24

In book VII of *Confessiones*, therefore, we are provided with an understanding of the attainment of the vision that demonstrates significant development in Augustine's thought since the composition of *De Quantitate Animae*. Whereas in *De Quantitate Animae* Augustine eloquently wrote of the soul's greatness and the ability of the soul to reject the body, and so reject the realm of corporeality, it is the soul's weakness that is emphasized in book VII of *Confessiones*. Instead of speaking of the soul's ascent to God, Augustine writes of the descent of God to humanity, and of the necessity of humbly submitting to the incarnate Word who alone can lift us up to God. Instead of speaking of the attainment of the vision of God through sloughing off the body, he writes of God embracing the corporeal life, thus providing a model and a means for humanity to live in right relationship with the corporeal. Consequently, when Augustine writes of his attempts to attain the vision of God through a process of interiority similar to that expounded in *De Quantitate Animae*, he refers to the brief glimpse of the divine he attained as only producing dejection, disconcertment, and recognition that he had not truly attained that which he desired above all things: "What he has sought in book 7," James J. O'Donnell writes, "he has found, but in a puzzling state of alienation that leaves room for book 8 and Christ."<sup>70</sup> And significantly, when next we find Augustine describing an experience of vision, as he does in book IX of *Confessiones*, we find him placing the vision squarely within a Christological framework not found in *Confessiones* VII.10.16 or VII.17.23. It is to this famous 'Vision at Ostia' that we now turn.

### **Book IX: The Vision at Ostia**

Before we examine the vision itself, it is necessary to provide some narrative background in order to understand the context in which the vision occurred. Much occurs in Augustine's life between the attempts at ascent described in book VII and the vision

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<sup>70</sup> *Confessions II: Commentary on Books 1-7*, 445.

recounted in book IX. Most notably, book VIII contains the famous conversion scene in the Milanese garden in which Augustine, after reading Romans 13.13-14, was filled with “a light of relief” and was enabled finally to convert to Christianity.<sup>71</sup> After this conversion, he retreated for approximately six months at Cassiciacum with a number of companions and was subsequently baptized by Ambrose in Milan. During his time in this city, Augustine became engrossed in the worship of the church there – worship characterized by the singing of hymns and psalms – and found himself deeply moved by the experience of this communal worship: “I wept much at the chants of your hymns. In the past I had sighed for you, and now at last was breathing your air to the extent that air is free to move in a house of straw.”<sup>72</sup> Admiring his mother’s vigilance in living a life of prayer,<sup>73</sup> Augustine determined, along with his companions, to live the devout life together as a community of monks in order continually to breathe the fragrance of God through prayer and worship.<sup>74</sup> It was decided, likely because most of the group was from the area, that they could most usefully serve God in northern Africa, and preparations were therefore made to return home. As can be seen, the emphasis for Augustine after his conversion to Christianity appears to have been on the worship of God *in community*, and was not focused on the individual. This point will be explored in greater detail below when we examine the vision itself. However, before this examination takes place, I will provide just a little more narrative background.

The seaport most common for travel to northern Africa from Italy was at Ostia, Rome’s main port city, and thus, shortly after deciding to live the devout life, Augustine and his companions made their way to Ostia to await a ship. Included in this group was Monica, Augustine’s mother, who had also been at Cassiciacum. Augustine’s admiration

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<sup>71</sup> *Conf.*, VIII.12.30.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, IX.7.16.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, IX.7.15.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, IX.8.17.

and love for his mother are evident in the *Cassiciacum* dialogues; Monica's piety and intelligence are frequently commented upon. As well, throughout *Confessiones* Monica is portrayed as playing a major role in her son's continuing quest for truth. It is with profound sadness, therefore, that Augustine begins chapter eight of book IX with the following words: "While we were at Ostia by the mouths of the Tiber, my mother died."<sup>75</sup> Chapters eight and nine contain a moving tribute to Monica, in which Augustine describes the love and piety displayed by his mother up until the time of her death when she "exercised care for everybody as if they were all her own children."<sup>76</sup>

The climax of this tribute is found in *Confessiones* IX.10.23-25 in which Augustine recounts the experience of mystical vision shared by himself and Monica during her final days. It is this experience – shared by a highly educated, newly converted Christian and his uneducated but devout mother – which will be explored in detail below. Like the experiences described in book VII, the vision at Ostia contains a number of clear Plotinian overtones. However, Augustine's description of the vision at Ostia contains some significant differences from the descriptions of the visions at Milan, and indeed I will suggest that the vision of Ostia should be read as being the fruit of the realizations made by Augustine in the earlier book regarding the necessity of Christ and the inability of humanity to ascend to the vision by its own strength.

#### *The Vision as Described by Augustine*

Augustine's description of the vision opens with an account of an intimate conversation enjoyed by Monica and himself while gazing at the beauty of a garden outside the window of the guesthouse where they were resting. Following St Paul's exhortation to forget the past and to strain "forward to what lies ahead,"<sup>77</sup> Augustine and

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., IX.9.22.

<sup>77</sup> Philippians 3.13.

Monica began their conversation by focusing on “what the quality of life the eternal life of the saints will have, a life which ‘neither eye has seen nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man’ (1 Cor 2.9).”<sup>78</sup> Attempting “in some degree to reflect on so great a reality,”<sup>79</sup> the two seekers discussed the delights of eternity and came to the conclusion that “the pleasure of the bodily senses, however delightful in the radiant light of this physical world, is seen by comparison with the life of eternity to be not even worth considering.”<sup>80</sup> As the conversation continued, Augustine tells us that their “minds were lifted up by an ardent affection towards eternal being itself,” and that he and Monica began to withdraw into themselves.<sup>81</sup> And, in doing so the two experienced a moment of vision:

Step by step we climbed beyond all corporeal objects and the heaven itself, where sun, moon, and stars shed light on the earth. We ascended even further by internal reflection and dialogue and wonder and your works, and we entered into our own minds. We moved up beyond them so as to attain to the region of inexhaustible abundance where you feed Israel eternally with truth for food. There life is the wisdom by which all creatures come into being, both things which were and which will be. But wisdom itself is not brought into being but is as it was and always will be. Furthermore, in this wisdom there is no past and future, but only being, since it is eternal. For to exist in the past or in the future is no property of the eternal. And while we talked and panted over it, we touched it in some small degree by a moment of total concentration of the heart. And we sighed and left behind us ‘the firstfruits of the Spirit’ (Rom. 8.23) bound to that higher world, as we returned to the noise of our human speech where a sentence has both a beginning and an ending. But what is to be compared with your word, Lord of our lives? It dwells in you without growing old and gives renewal to all things.<sup>82</sup>

Having, for a moment, “touched [eternal wisdom] in some small degree,” Monica and Augustine quite literally return to their senses to continue their conversation, enriched by this brief experience of vision. Suppose, they wonder, the tumult of the flesh were to cease, and we were no longer inflicted with inordinate attachment to material things. Suppose, they continue, that we were able completely to withdraw from the

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<sup>78</sup> *Conf.*, IX.10.23.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, IX.10.24.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*



myriad of images which inflict us continually, so that the soul was able to move beyond thinking of even itself.<sup>83</sup> For if the soul could do this, they muse, if the soul could break free from the ‘noise’ of corporeality, it may be that it could hear God himself, “not through the tongue of the flesh, nor through the voice of an angel, nor through the sound of thunder, nor through the obscurity of a symbolic utterance.”<sup>84</sup> Augustine describes the end of their conversation with the following words:

Him who in these things we love we would hear in person without their mediation. That is how it was when at that moment we extended our reach and in a flash of mental energy attained the eternal wisdom which abides beyond all things. If only it could last, and other visions of a vastly inferior kind could be withdrawn! Then this alone could ravish and absorb and enfold in inward joys the person granted the vision. So too eternal life is of the quality of that moment of understanding after which we sighed. Is not this the meaning of ‘Enter into the joy of your Lord’ (Matt. 25.21)? And when is that to be? Surely it is when ‘we all rise again, but are not all changed’ (1 Cor. 15.51).<sup>85</sup>

*Assessing the Affinities Between the ‘Vision at Ostia,’ De Quantitate Animae, and Neoplatonism*

Immersed in a conversation about eternal joy, Augustine and Monica briefly experience that which will be enjoyed eternally; that is, they ascended to the vision of God. The way in which this vision is described has much in common with the way in which the attainment of vision is posited in *De Quantitate Animae*. In this earlier treatise, as noted above, we are told of the great delight, enjoyment, and peace that accompanies the ascent to vision, as well as of the knowledge and understanding which naturally

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<sup>83</sup> Augustine writes: “Therefore we said: If to anyone the tumult of the flesh has fallen silent, if the images of earth, water, and air are quiescent, if the heavens themselves are shut out and the very soul itself is making no sound and is surpassing itself by no longer thinking about itself, if all dreams and visions in the imagination are excluded, if all language and every sign and everything transitory is silent – for if anyone could hear them, this is what all of them would be saying, ‘We did not make ourselves, we were made by him who abides for eternity’ (Ps. 79.3, 5) – if after this declaration they were to keep silence, having directed our ears to him that made them, then he alone would not speak through them but through himself” (ibid., IX.10.25).

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

follow this vision of God.<sup>86</sup> In *Confessiones* IX.10.23-25, the attainment of vision is described in similar terms. For example, in book IX Augustine writes of the “inward joys” which accompany the beholder of God.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, we are told that the vision experienced by Augustine and Monica brought them a “moment of understanding” wherein they attained knowledge of the divine by reaching out to “the eternal wisdom which abides beyond all things.”<sup>88</sup> And just as Augustine stressed in *De Quantitate Animae* that the vision attained is a vision of God as he is, so in *Confessiones* IX.10.23-25 he emphasizes that the vision attained by Monica and himself, however brief, was a vision of God without the need of symbols or other created things.

Furthermore, there is much within Augustine’s description of the vision of God that manifests Plotinian influence. Although I have suggested above that the vision at Ostia is significantly different from those at Milan, many scholars, while acknowledging the distinctiveness of the vision at Ostia, nevertheless stress its Neoplatonic nature.<sup>89</sup> Paul Henry, in his book *La vision d’Ostie*, eloquently argues that ideas and themes present in Plotinus’ *Enneads* – particularly I.6, “On Beauty,” and V.1, “On the Three Principle Hypostases” – are also present in *Confessiones* IX.10.23-25,<sup>90</sup> especially with regards to Augustine’s emphasis on the immutability of God, the transcendence and plenitude of divine beauty – which is the source of all beauty -, rapture, pleasure, and awe, among others.<sup>91</sup> These affinities lead Henry to conclude that the Plotinian influence on Augustine’s description of the vision at Ostia was “considérable,” and that “Augustin

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<sup>86</sup> *QuAn.*, 33.76.

<sup>87</sup> *Conf.*, IX.10.25.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> The Neoplatonic influence on book IX of *Confessiones* is widely acknowledged. See O’Meara, *The Young Augustine*, 153; Bernard McGinn, *op. cit.*, 234; Frederick Van Fleteren, “Mysticism in the *Confessiones* – A Controversy Revisited,” *Collectanea Augustiniana: Augustine: Mystic and Mystagogue*, Joseph Reino, et al., eds. (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 314; among others.

<sup>90</sup> *La vision d’Ostie: Sa place dans la vie et l’oeuvre de saint Augustin* (Paris : Vrin, 1938), 15-26. Andrew Louth also recognizes the important place which these two Plotinian treatises had on Augustine’s thought as presented in *Confessiones* IX.10.23-25 (Cf. *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, 139).

<sup>91</sup> Paul Henry, *La vision d’Ostie*, 22.

s'est pénétré non pas de telle ou telle idée de Plotin, mais de sa tournure d'esprit."<sup>92</sup>

Henry suggests that books VII and IX of *Confessiones* clearly demonstrate Augustine's acceptance and appropriation of much of Plotinian thought, utilizing not only the language and imagery of Neoplatonic philosophy, but also "les mêmes gestes."<sup>93</sup>

It cannot be legitimately denied, given the evidence and the sheer weight of academic opinion, that the spectre of Plotinus looms large in Augustine's description of the vision of Ostia, and indeed, this should not surprise us. Augustine found much within Plotinus' thought to be deeply moving; as Andrew Louth writes, "Augustine has drunk deep of Plotinus, and found much in common between Plotinus' soul and his own."<sup>94</sup> For example, the influence of Plotinian thought is evident in Augustine's use of the theme of interiority and ascent in book IX. Moving from the material world, Augustine and Monica withdrew inwardly to contemplate the depths of their souls, and only by moving inwards and upwards did they reach out to see eternal wisdom. This description of interior withdrawal is similar to Plotinus' thought, especially as it is formulated in *Ennead* V.1. In this treatise Plotinus exhorts his readers to embark on an inward journey somewhat analogous to that taken by Augustine and his mother: "Admiring the world of sense as we look out upon its vastness and beauty and the order of its eternal march, thinking of the gods within it, seen and hidden, and the celestial spirits and all the life of animal and plant, let us mount to its archetype, to the yet more authentic sphere."<sup>95</sup>

The influence of Plotinus on Augustine is clear. However, to emphasize the affinities between the vision at Ostia and Plotinian thought may be to run the risk of ignoring or underemphasizing the specifically Christian emphases and themes found in Augustine's account; emphases and themes which are clearly connected to *Confessiones*

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 29: "Augustine absorbed not only a few of Plotinus' ideas, but his form of mind."

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> *Op. cit.*, 139.

<sup>95</sup> *Enn.*, V.1.4. Cf. Andrew Louth, *op. cit.*, 139-140.

VII.18.24 in which, as we saw, he stressed human inability and the necessity of Christ as mediator. In the account of the vision at Ostia we find Augustine Christianizing Plotinus' thought, utilizing what he sees as valuable in Plotinian mysticism and discarding or transforming what he does not find compatible with Christianity. We will now turn to an analysis of Augustine's description of the vision at Ostia, paying particular attention to the specifically Christian themes emphasized by him.

*Neoplatonic Ascent Christianized: The Christianization of Language*

That Augustine wants his reader to recognize that the vision shared by himself and his mother was a distinctly Christian one is clear from the scriptural language used to describe the vision; language distinctly different from that found in *De Quantitate Animae* and in *Confessiones* VII.10.16 and VII.17.23. In *De Quantitate Animae*, as noted in the previous chapter, Augustine's conception of the vision of God is largely formulated without the use of scripture. Scriptural quotations are rarely found in this treatise, and while Augustine does introduce Christian terminology in 33.76 – he there refers to the Church, the Son of God, and to St Paul – his description of the way in which the soul attains the vision of God mainly contains philosophical language borrowed from the Neoplatonists. Similarly, the visions at Milan are intentionally presented by Augustine as being explicitly based on Neoplatonic thought – it is through the “Platonic books” that he was admonished to return into himself<sup>96</sup> – and as a result, these visions are described utilizing the intellectual structure and language of Plotinus.<sup>97</sup> While various references to scripture are found in *Confessiones* VII.10.16 and VII.17.23, it is clear that Augustine wants his reader to understand that the attempts at attaining the vision prior to his conversion to Christianity were undertaken on the basis of his exposure to Neoplatonism.

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<sup>96</sup> *Conf.*, VII.10.16.

<sup>97</sup> Paul Henry, *op. cit.*, 22.

In contrast to *De Quantitate Animae* and book VII of *Confessiones*, Augustine's description of the vision at Ostia reads quite differently. For instance, there are nearly a dozen scriptural quotations interspersed throughout *Confessiones* IX.10.23-25, and these references to scripture play an integral part in his description of the attainment of the vision. Whereas the Platonic books provided the basis for his earlier attempts at attaining the vision, we see in his account of the vision at Ostia that the conversation which initiated Monica and Augustine's experience of vision revolved around scriptural themes. Augustine opens his description of the vision with reference to one of Paul's epistles: "Alone with each other, we talked very intimately. 'Forgetting the past and reaching forward to what lies ahead' (Phil. 3.13), we were searching together in the presence of the truth which is you yourself."<sup>98</sup> Through this reference to Philippians 3.13, Augustine places their search squarely within a Christological framework, and this is made especially clear when we examine the context of the verse quoted above. For, if we read Philippians 3.14, it becomes clear that the goal toward which Paul is reaching is "the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."<sup>99</sup> It is this 'heavenly call,' by which Paul appears to mean the attainment of eternal life through Jesus Christ, toward which Augustine and Monica are straining, and it is for this reason that their conversation immediately turns to wondering what the "eternal life of the saints" is like; a life, and here again Augustine quotes scripture, which "neither eye has seen nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man" (1 Cor. 2.9)."<sup>100</sup> As can be seen, the language used throughout this opening paragraph (*Confessiones* IX.10.23) is largely the language of scripture, thus suggesting that Augustine wants his reader to understand the distinctly Christian context of the vision experienced with his mother.

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<sup>98</sup> *Conf.*, IX.10.23.

<sup>99</sup> Philippians 3.13-14 reads as follows: "Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

<sup>100</sup> *Conf.*, IX.10.23.

Furthermore, his account of their interior withdrawal quoted above – a withdrawal that bears many similarities to that advocated by Plotinus – is described with the use of distinctly Christian language. For instance, Augustine utilizes scriptural language when he refers to Plotinus’ “more authentic sphere,” the sphere to which one ascends through interior withdrawal.<sup>101</sup> In *Confessiones* IX.10.24, Augustine writes that the region which he and Monica attained through interiority was “the region of inexhaustible abundance where you feed Israel with truth for food,” a region where “life is the wisdom by which all creatures come into being.”<sup>102</sup> He is not quoting directly from scripture here, but the language used by Augustine is clearly scriptural. Furthermore, this reference to wisdom is evidently a direct reference to the incarnate Word who is referred to as wisdom throughout other passages of *Confessiones*, including VII.18.24 discussed above.<sup>103</sup> This use of distinctly Christian imagery and language continues into the next paragraph in which Augustine and Monica discuss what it would be like were they to experience eternally the vision of God which they had just experienced. They come to the conclusion that the attainment of eternal vision will occur through the attainment of eternal life in which God will be enjoyed through the vision of him as he is, and Augustine quotes Matthew 25.21, taken from Jesus’ parable of the talents, in which the master rewards his faithful servant by telling him to “enter into the joy of your master.” “And when is that to be?” Augustine asks.<sup>104</sup> The answer is found, he writes, in 1 Corinthians 15 in which Paul describes the resurrection of the dead in detail, and the verse quoted by Augustine at the end of his account of the vision at Ostia illustrates the importance of the resurrection of the body for his conception of the vision: “Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment in the

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<sup>101</sup> *Enn.*, V.1.4.

<sup>102</sup> *Conf.*, IX.10.24.

<sup>103</sup> See also *ibid.*, IV.12.19.; VII.9.14. I will discuss the role of ‘wisdom’ in the vision attained by Augustine and Monica in greater detail below.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, IX.10.25.

twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet,” writes Paul, and it is part of this quotation that Augustine cites in IX.10.25. “For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”<sup>105</sup> These examples of Augustine’s quotation of scripture, and of his use of scriptural language, indicate that, however much he may have borrowed from Plotinus in his description of the vision at Ostia, Plotinian language and ideas are translated by Augustine into biblical language and imagery in *Confessiones* IX.10.23-25 to an extent not found in *De Quantitate Animae*.

*Neoplatonic Ascent Christianized: The Ecclesiological Context of the Vision at Ostia*

However, as Augustine’s reference to the resurrection of the body indicates, he did more than simply replace Plotinus’ philosophical language with Christian language in his account of the vision at Ostia. Rather, he presents his reader with a characteristically Christian conception of the attainment of the vision of God which, as shall be seen, provides a corrective to his pre-conversion conception of the vision as described in book VII which was largely based on Neoplatonic mysticism. And central to his formulation of the attainment of vision in book IX of *Confessiones* is the importance of community, and in particular the community of the church.

Plotinus has nothing to say about attaining the vision of God in the presence of community. The quest for vision, according to him, is one undertaken alone: “This is the life of gods and of the godlike and blessed among men,” he writes with reference to the attainment of vision, “liberation from the alien that besets us here, a life taking no pleasure in the things of the earth, the passing of *solitary to solitary*.”<sup>106</sup> The flight to vision, as Andrew Louth describes Plotinus’ conception, is “a solitary way that leads to the One, sovereign in solitary transcendence. The One has no concern for the soul that seeks him; nor has the soul more than a passing concern for others engaged on the same

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<sup>105</sup> 1 Corinthians 15.51-52.

<sup>106</sup> *Enn.*, VI.9.11. Italics mine.

quest: it has no companions.”<sup>107</sup> This conception of the vision as a flight of the alone to the alone appears as well in *De Quantitate Animae*, although admittedly, Augustine does refer to the role of “Mother Church” in nurturing believers in perfect health, and this reference probably demonstrates that he understood the church to play a role in guiding believers to the vision of God.<sup>108</sup> Nevertheless, such an idea is not fully developed in this treatise, and the emphasis appears rather to be on the solo quest of the soul to attain the vision of God it so desires.

In Augustine’s description of the vision at Ostia, however, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the role of the church to the extent that the attainment of the vision of God is understood to take place within an ecclesiastical framework. For example, by emphasizing that a devout but uneducated Christian such as Monica can attain the vision of God, Augustine appears to be indicating that the church provided the necessary context from which Monica could be raised to great height. As already mentioned, the chapters immediately preceding *Confessiones* IX.10.23-25 contain a brief biography and tribute to Monica.<sup>109</sup> The reader is informed that, from the moment of her birth, Monica “was trained ‘in your fear’ (Ps. 5.8) by the discipline of your Christ, by the government of your only Son in a believing household through a good member of your Church.”<sup>110</sup> Married to a man known both “for his kindness and for his quick temper,” Monica spoke to him of God “by her virtues through which you made her beautiful, so that her husband loved, respected and admired her,”<sup>111</sup> and through her faithful witness he eventually converted to Christianity at the end of his life.<sup>112</sup> Augustine tells us that she was extraordinarily devout, serving the church with love as “a servant of your servants.”<sup>113</sup> “[A]ny of them

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<sup>107</sup> *Op. cit.*, 51.

<sup>108</sup> *QuAn.*, 33.76.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. *Conf.*, IX.8.17 – IX.9.22.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, IX.8.17.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, IX.8.18.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, IX.9.22.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*



who knew her,” he writes, “found much to praise in her, held her in honour and loved her; for they felt your presence in her heart, witnessed by the fruits of her holy way of life.”<sup>114</sup> She was, in short, a woman of tremendous piety and faith who had lived the whole of her life serving Christ in his church. She was not, however, a woman of great learning, and this fact is confirmed in the Cassiciacum dialogues of which she was a part. Although Augustine often depicts Monica in these dialogues as providing the occasional nugget of wisdom, it is clear from the surprise expressed by Augustine and his companions when she spoke that Monica did not have the educational background of those at the Cassiciacum retreat.<sup>115</sup>

Therefore, it is highly significant that Monica is included in Augustine’s description of the vision at Ostia, for it demonstrates something of an evolution in his thought since the composition of *De Quantitate Animae*. As was noted above, Augustine depicts the vision of God in *De Quantitate Animae* as being attainable through the exercise of the soul’s highest powers of reason whereby it gradually purges itself of its attachment to the corporeal through a process of interiority and reasons its way toward the contemplation of the incorporeal God. This understanding of the attainment of vision is based upon the idea that “a few, among whom [Augustine] was one, could arrive at the vision of the Father through reason alone.”<sup>116</sup> It was on the basis of this conception of the healing powers of reason that Augustine attempted his ascents to vision described in book VII, and although he stresses that his visions at Milan were only fleeting, he is clear that his experiences resulted from his use of reason informed and strengthened by his philosophical learning. He had embarked on a journey accessible to the few who had a high level of education and learning who could therefore utilize their powers of reasoning in order to transcend the corporeal world.

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Cf. *DeOrd.*, I.11.31-32; II.1.1. See also *DBV*, 27.

<sup>116</sup> John J. O’Meara, *The Young Augustine*, 142.

The inclusion of Monica in the vision at Ostia shatters this earlier conception of the vision of God being accessible only to the few. No longer does Augustine understand the attainment of the vision of God to be through philosophical learning; no longer does he understand the vision of God to be attainable only by the few. Rather, Augustine now suggests that the vision of God is attainable in this life, however briefly, even for the uneducated and those who make little use of their reason. For, as the example of Monica suggests, the vision is attainable through the nurturing of Christ's church, in which the believer is trained by the discipline of Christ<sup>117</sup> to love one's fellow believers, acting as a faithful servant to all.<sup>118</sup> By including Monica in the vision at Ostia, Augustine appears to be emphasizing that one such as Monica – one purified by Christ in the context of the church – can be sufficiently unsullied to attain to a vision of God more satisfying, more fulfilling, than could be attained by the greatest of intellects. As Bernard McGinn writes regarding the inclusion of Monica in the vision at Ostia, "One cannot but surmise...that the bishop is giving a subtle hint that true vision can be achieved only within the saving community of the church of Christ."<sup>119</sup> And by arguing as such, Augustine effectively transforms Plotinus' spirituality for the few into a spirituality for the many, accessible to all who humbly submit themselves to Jesus Christ, and who learn humility in the community of the church.<sup>120</sup>

Augustine's endeavour to place the attainment of the vision of God within an ecclesiastical framework is not limited to this inclusion of Monica in the ascent to vision at Ostia. For it is not without reason that he emphasizes that the vision attained at Ostia was attained in the context of community; that is, it was attained, not through the solitary efforts of an individual striving for God, but it was attained in the context of a community

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<sup>117</sup> *Conf.*, IX.8.17.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, IX.9.22.

<sup>119</sup> *Op. cit.*, 234.

<sup>120</sup> See the titles of chapters IX and X of John J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine*.

of two individuals lovingly engaged in an intimate conversation about eternal things. It can therefore be argued that, by portraying the vision of God as having been attained jointly by two seekers, Augustine is stressing the necessity of a life of faith lived in community for the attainment of the soul's deepest longing. Augustine and Monica can thus be understood as representing the community of the church in microcosm, together seeking the joy found in the contemplation of God.

"Ostia represents, in miniature," Robert J. O'Connell writes, "Augustine's estimate of human life, and notably, his model for the 'society' of soul with soul."<sup>121</sup> And fundamental to this model for community is Augustine's conception of the role of love in the attainment of the vision at Ostia; a conception already referred to in *Confessiones* VII.18.24. Augustine writes that he and his mother were "searching together in the presence of the truth which is you yourself," thus indicating that their quest for the vision was undertaken under the guidance and presence of the Word, and furthermore that their quest was undertaken in the presence of one another in community.<sup>122</sup> As the two seekers discussed the nature of eternal life, Augustine tells us that they "drank in the waters flowing from your spring on high, 'the spring of life' (Ps. 35.10) which is with you."<sup>123</sup> Their conversation eventually led them to the conclusion that the pleasures of the bodily senses can have no comparison to the life of eternity, and it is at this point that they begin their interior ascent climbing "beyond all corporeal objects and the heaven itself" finally entering into their own minds.<sup>124</sup> However, the means by which Augustine and Monica made this ascent of their minds is referred to immediately prior to the description of the ascent quoted at length above. In a brief but significant sentence Augustine writes that, as their conversation regarding eternal life

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<sup>121</sup> *St. Augustine's Confessions: The Odyssey of the Soul* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989), 115.

<sup>122</sup> *Conf.*, IX.10.23.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, IX.10.24.

continued, their “minds were lifted up by an ardent affection towards eternal being itself.”<sup>125</sup> This sentence is easily skipped over, but it is important for it demonstrates, as was the case in *Confessiones* VII.18.24, Augustine’s insistence that love plays an integral role in the ascent of the soul. Throughout *Confessiones* Augustine emphasizes that love is intimately connected with humility. When referring to his inability to embrace Jesus Christ at the time he had first read the Neoplatonists, he writes that he lacked both the humility and love that requires true purification. It is “charity,” he writes, “which builds on the foundation of humility which is Jesus Christ,” and which brings about the true transformation of the person, a transformation that has its end in the vision of God.<sup>126</sup> Pride does not allow true charity to exist and thrive, for pride manifests itself in the inordinate love of oneself and of other created things purely for selfish enjoyment. To love truly, Augustine suggests, is to love God in the other, and to love God through that which he has created.<sup>127</sup> And the means by which we love, we read in book XIII, is the Holy Spirit who sets hearts on fire with love, thus allowing ascent to the divine.<sup>128</sup>

Given this understanding of the Holy Spirit, it could be suggested that it is by the action of the Holy Spirit in Augustine and Monica which caused them to be filled with love, and it was this love which raised them “towards eternal being itself.”<sup>129</sup> Augustine does not define exactly to whom the ‘ardent affection’ was directed, but given his insistence in earlier works that rightly loving the other means that we love God through the other, and given that it was through this love that the ascent was made, it would appear that the love shared by Augustine and Monica was the gift of love that Augustine explicitly connects with the Holy Spirit by which “we are set on fire and carried upward:

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid. R.S. Pine-Coffin translates this sentence as “the flame of love burned stronger in us and raised us higher towards the eternal God” (*Confessions* [Toronto: Penguin, 1961]).

<sup>126</sup> *Conf.*, VII.20.26.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., IV.12.18: “If physical objects give you pleasure, praise God for them and return love to their Maker lest, in the things that please you, you displease him. If souls please you, they are being loved in God; for they also are mutable and acquire stability by being established in him.”

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., XIII.9.10.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., IX.10.24.

we grow red hot and ascend.”<sup>130</sup> Through this love shared in community, not through the individual exercise of reason, Augustine and Monica ascended inwards and upwards to a vision of the wisdom who had united himself to humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. In this community, where soul was united with soul through the bonds of love, Augustine and Monica attained a foretaste of that which will be experienced eternally. And that which will be experienced eternally is the vision of God which will be seen in community by all “of the saints.”<sup>131</sup> The vision attained by Augustine and Monica is reached in and through the community of love, and according to Augustine this brief vision prefigures the eternal vision in that the heavenly enjoyment of God is also experienced in community whereby the saints communally gaze upon their creator in an eternal experience of complete understanding. It could, therefore, be argued that in *Confessiones* IX.10.23-25 Augustine is implicitly arguing that true vision is attained in the community of the church, in the midst of which love and humility reign, and in which Christ, through the Holy Spirit, heals the “many and great” diseases which plague all human souls.<sup>132</sup>

In *Confessiones* IX.10.23-25 we find a conception of the attainment of the vision of God which can be read as the flowering of Augustine’s earlier failed attempts at ascent in book VII, and the assessment he made of the necessity and efficacy of the incarnation for such an ascent to occur. In *Confessiones* VII.18.24, as was noted above, Augustine posited a radically different conception of the attainment of vision than that of the Neoplatonists, emphasizing that humanity is not capable of self-purification and that because humanity cannot ascend to the divine, the divine descended to humanity. Purification, he writes there, comes through the incarnate Word who cleanses those who humbly accept him, healing them of their pride and nourishing their love. This important section, I am suggesting, provides the foundation for what Augustine has to say about the

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., XIII.9.10.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., IX.10.23.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., X.43.69.

attainment of vision in *Confessiones* IX.10.23-25, and indeed the vision experienced at Ostia should be understood as the flowering of the ideas expressed in book VII of *Confessiones*.

## **Conclusion**

In 1845 Ary Scheffer, a Dutch/French artist, painted “Saints Augustine and Monica,” and in it he sought to depict the moment of vision experienced by his two subjects in Ostia. Sitting next to the window overlooking a garden Augustine and Monica gaze serenely at an unseen light that illuminates both of them. The love shared between mother and son is admirably displayed in the way in which Monica’s two hands carefully hold Augustine’s left hand, as well as in the gesture of loving servitude made by Augustine who is sitting lower than his mother. The sense one gets from this painting is that the two seekers, who had been engaged in conversation, are both surprised and awed by the vision that has come upon them. Their faces do not portray struggle, as if they were actively pursuing the attainment of the vision, but are rather characterized by serenity and love.

This painting depicts in visual form at least some of what I have been attempting to express regarding Augustine’s conception of the attainment of the vision as developed in *Confessiones*. The vision, Augustine emphasizes in books VII and IX of *Confessiones*, cannot be attained through a process of interiority that is based on the ability of the soul to transcend its attachment to the corporeal for such an understanding of the soul’s ability, he argues, is incongruent with reality. Much emphasis is placed by Augustine on the detrimental effects of pride, specifically with regards to the way in which pride compels humanity to find enjoyment in created things, not in God. The love the soul has for created things acts as glue, binding the soul to them with such intensity that the soul is incapable of transcending this bondage to corporeality for any sustained period of time.

To attempt an ascent to God that is based on a prideful assessment of the soul's ability is illogical, Augustine warns, for one cannot heal the damage caused by pride with pride.

Rather, because humanity lacks the ability to ascend to God, Augustine posits that God humbly descended to humanity in the person of Jesus Christ who is the mediator between God and humanity. This descent of God demonstrates the humility of the divine, and furthermore, it demonstrates to us that the ascent to God can only be attained through humility; that is, through the humble recognition of our powerlessness and through submission to the God-man who alone can heal the wounds inflicted by wrongly-ordered love. One does not attain the vision of God through the power of reason, but rather only through the aid of Jesus Christ who cleanses humanity in and through the Holy Spirit in the context of the church, in which, Augustine emphasizes, love and humility reign supreme as believers gather to seek after the vision of God. The ascent to God is not solitary, but is a flight of the loving community of Christ, empowered and purified by Christ, to the triune God.

**Chapter Three**  
**De Trinitate and the Vision of God:**  
**The Purifying Love of the Holy Spirit in Books XIV and XV**

So the love which is from God and is God is distinctively the Holy Spirit; through him the charity of God is poured in our hearts, and through it the whole triad dwells in us. This is the reason why it is most apposite that the Holy Spirit, while being God, should also be called the gift of God. And this gift, surely, is distinctively to be understood as being the charity which brings us through to God, without which no other gift of God at all can bring us through to God.<sup>1</sup>

**Introduction: *De Trinitate* and Augustine's Quest for the Vision of God**

Part of Augustine's great appeal to his readers is the degree to which he revealed so much of himself in his writings. From *De Quantitate Animae* to *Confessiones* to his later writings, Augustine invested and revealed a great deal of himself on virtually every page. His treatise on the doctrine of the Trinity, *De Trinitate*, is no exception. Far from being a work of merely speculative thinking,<sup>2</sup> *De Trinitate* is a record of Augustine's search for God, and as such there is a dramatic quality to it in which he invites his readers to partake. To read through *De Trinitate* is to come to the realization that there is more than a grain of truth to Edmund Hill's suggestion that of "all his mature works the *De trinitate*...is the most personal – yes, even more so than the *Confessions*."<sup>3</sup> Augustine wrote this work between c. 399 and 420, and by the time the work was finally published he was, in his words, "an old man."<sup>4</sup> He was by this point in his life a mature Christian bishop renowned throughout the Christian West for his learning and erudition, and was considered a theological authority. Confronted with a myriad of false ideas regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, Augustine composed *De Trinitate* to respond to these falsehoods "[f]or nowhere else is a mistake more dangerous, or the search more laborious, or

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<sup>1</sup> *DeTrin.*, XV.32.

<sup>2</sup> As Peter Brown appears to suggest (*op. cit.*, 274). While Brown praises Augustine's "capacity for speculation" in *De Trinitate*, the fact that his references to this work in his important biography are very sparse perhaps illustrates Brown's distaste for this particular genre within Augustine's corpus.

<sup>3</sup> *The Mystery of the Trinity* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1985), 77.

<sup>4</sup> *DeTrin.*, Prefatory Letter from Augustine to Aurelius, Bishop of Carthage: "I was a young man when I began these books on the Trinity which the one true God is, and I am now an old man as I publish them."



discovery more advantageous.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, in books I through IV he systematically examines the veracity of Catholic teaching about the doctrine based on the revelation of the scriptures, and in so doing, provides an extended discourse on what Christians are rightly to believe about the triune God.

However, Augustine’s purpose in *De Trinitate* is not only to expound the doctrine of the Trinity based on scripture, for what he is most anxious to attain is the knowledge of God; that is to say, he wants intimately to know and understand that which he believes. And, according to Augustine, this complete knowledge of God is attained through the vision of God as he is. From the opening book of *De Trinitate*, he identifies the soteriological goal of Christianity to be the vision of God. He writes that in this vision there will be no more need of signs and symbols, no more need simply to believe what we do not as yet understand.<sup>6</sup> In this vision the “inexpressible reality” that is God “can be inexpressibly seen by” believers, and as such, “full knowledge of God’s substance” will be attained.<sup>7</sup> To see, according to Augustine, is to understand, and following the psalmist’s exhortation to ‘Seek his face always,’<sup>8</sup> he embarks in *De Trinitate* on an extended and dramatic quest to attain the vision of God and so attain the “sight which ravishes every soul with the desire for it.”<sup>9</sup>

Books VIII through XV should be read as an account of Augustine’s quest to lead his readers to the attainment of the vision of God, a quest to understand that which is only now believed. In books VIII through XII, this pursuit is undertaken within the framework of the Neoplatonic notion of the ascent of the soul; a notion that should by now be quite familiar to my readers. As noted above, the motif of the ascent of the soul through interiority was central to Augustine’s conception of the attainment of the vision

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., I.5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., I.16.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., I.3.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., I.5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., II.28.

in *De Quantitate Animae*, and in *Confessiones*, interiority likewise played an integral role, although his assessment of the potential of attaining a vision through interior withdrawal was significantly less optimistic than was the case in *De Quantitate Animae*. In *De Trinitate* Augustine utilizes the Neoplatonic notion of interiority in a rhetorical fashion similar to that which he employed in *Confessiones*, for as will be demonstrated below, he guides his readers to embark on an interior movement ultimately to demonstrate the failure of philosophical speculation to raise the mind to the contemplation of God. According to Augustine in *De Trinitate*, the purification and cleansing necessary for humanity to attain the vision of God cannot be achieved through interior withdrawal, and book XII contains his ruminations on the detrimental effects of sin on human potentiality.

However, despite his negative assessment of the possibilities of attaining the vision through Neoplatonism's interiority and ascent, Augustine does not waver from his conception that the vision of God is the soteriological goal of Christianity. But how does one achieve the necessary purification for such a vision to be attained? Augustine's answer to this question is to be found in books XIII through XV. Book XIII contains Augustine's Christological answer to the human dilemma, for it is here that, in much the same way as he did in book VII of *Confessiones*, he posits Christ as the mediator between God and humanity who as both created and uncreated, as both divine and human, acts as a bridge between temporality and eternity. This book contains a significant and beautiful exposition of Augustine's understanding of the efficacy of the incarnation, but for reasons of space it will not be the focus of my examination of the attainment of the vision of God in *De Trinitate*.

Rather, I will be examining Augustine's pneumatological and ecclesiological answers to the problem of human sinfulness and inability to ascend to the vision of God, answers found largely in books XIV and XV. As was noted in the previous chapter, in

*Confessiones* Augustine suggests that the Holy Spirit plays a role in the purification of the soul, but this idea is not fully developed. Similarly, I suggested that his description of the vision at Ostia could legitimately be interpreted as an implicit suggestion that the vision of God is attained in the context of the community of the church. Both of these ideas, I will argue below, are made more explicit and are more fully developed in *De Trinitate*. The purification of the soul, which Augustine suggested in *De Quantitate Animae* occurs through interior withdrawal – albeit within the context of the church – is now explicitly attributed to the Holy Spirit, who is both the love that is from God and the love that is God. Furthermore, Augustine will posit that this purifying work of the Spirit is practically manifested in the context of the ecclesiastical community in which love is given and received in imitation of the community that is the triune God.

A comprehensive reading of the whole of *De Trinitate* is, of course, outside the scope of this chapter. What I shall endeavour to highlight are those aspects of this complex work which are most pertinent to the task I have set before myself. As such, I will begin with a brief descriptive account of Augustine's treatment of the theme of interiority in books VIII through XII, paying particular attention to his account of human fallenness in the latter book. It will be noted that Augustine characterizes the human dilemma, as indeed he did in *Confessiones*, in terms of the disordering of human love. I will then provide a description of his understanding of the Holy Spirit as the love shared between the Father and the Son, and as the love given to humanity by the Father and the Son; an idea that is largely formulated in book XV which will serve as the basis of my analysis. I will follow this discussion with an examination of the latter half of book XIV in which Augustine describes the ongoing renewal of the image of God, a renewal that finally culminates in the vision of God as he is. In my examination I will focus particularly on the role of the Spirit in renewal of the image of God, noting that this renewal is characterized by the reordering of human love through the bestowal of the

Holy Spirit. Finally, I will note that this reordering of human love by the Spirit is understood by Augustine to take place within the context of the ecclesiastical community, and that it is in community that the believer prepares for the eschatological fulfillment of the vision for which all souls long.

### **The Failure of Interiority: Books VIII – XIII and the Disordering of Human Love**

As Augustine himself notes in book XV, *De Trinitate* is divided into two distinct parts, books I through VII comprising the first half and books VIII through XV comprising the second half.<sup>10</sup> Augustine's describes his purpose in writing the first half as follows:

[W]e shall undertake to the best of our ability to give them the reasons they clamor for, and to account for the one and only and true God being a trinity, and for the rightness of saying, believing, and understanding that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are of one and the same substance or essence...[W]e must first establish by the authority of the holy scriptures whether the faith is in fact like that.<sup>11</sup>

The church teaches the equality, inseparability, and immutability of the Trinity, while at the same time asserting that this emphasis on the unity of God does not compromise his 'threeness.' And, Augustine argues, it bases this teaching on what it considers to be the correct interpretation of scripture.<sup>12</sup> It is Augustine's purpose in the first half of *De Trinitate*, in response to his nameless interlocutors, to demonstrate the veracity of the Catholic teaching through a thorough examination of scripture.<sup>13</sup> In so doing, he suggests

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<sup>10</sup> *DeTrin.*, XV.51. See also Jaroslav Pelikan, "*Canonica Regula: The Trinitarian Hermeneutics of Augustine*," *Proceedings of the Patristic, Mediaeval, and Renaissance Conference*, 17 and Edmund Hill, *op. cit.*, 80-82.

<sup>11</sup> *DeTrin.*, I.4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, I.7: "The purpose of all the Catholic commentators I have been able to read on the divine books of both testaments, who have written before me on the trinity which God is, has been to teach that according to the scriptures Father and Son and Holy Spirit in the inseparable equality of one substance present a divine unity; and therefore there are not three gods but one God; although indeed the Father has begotten the Son, and therefore he who is not the Father is not the Son; and the Son is begotten by the Father, and therefore he who is the Son is not the Father; and the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son, but only the Spirit of the Father and the Son, himself coequal to the Father and the Son, and belonging to the threefold unity."

<sup>13</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, "*Canonica Regula*," 17.

that he is attempting to confirm the “rule of faith” whereby Christians can know, on the basis of God’s revelation through scripture, what they are to believe regarding the Trinity even if they do not as yet understand that which they believe.<sup>14</sup>

However, no longer content simply to describe what is to be believed, Augustine suggests at the beginning of the second half of the work that he wants to “perceive” the eternal realities that have been the focus of his discussion in the first part of *De Trinitate*, and that he will, in this second half, endeavour to raise his mind to the contemplation of God whereby true knowledge and understanding of God is attained.<sup>15</sup> “The second part [of *De Trinitate*] is an attempt at understanding,” writes Andrew Louth, “an exercise in *fides quaerens intellectum*, meaning by that not simply an effort of elucidation, but primarily an attempt to see how the soul can come to contemplate God the Trinity, and in that way understand: not so much by knowing more and more about the Trinity, as knowing the triune God face to face.”<sup>16</sup> In order to accomplish this task, Augustine embarks on a process of interiority very similar to that advocated in *De Quantitate Animae*.

In both *De Quantitate Animae* and the latter half of *De Trinitate*, we see interiority as being a movement away from material, sensible things, toward the highest part of the soul which, according to Augustine, bears the greatest resemblance to its Originator.<sup>17</sup> Those who wish to see God – to contemplate and know him – must, Augustine suggests in *De Quantitate Animae*, return to themselves in order to redirect

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<sup>14</sup> This is Augustine’s terminology for what he tried to establish in the first seven books (See *DeTrin.*, XV.51).

<sup>15</sup> *DeTrin.*, VIII.1.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew Louth, “Augustine,” *The Study of Spirituality*, Cheslyn Jones, et al., eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 141.

<sup>17</sup> As noted in the first chapter, this conception of returning the soul to its original likeness is largely based on Plotinian metaphysics which suggests that the soul bears the closest resemblance to the Creator because the soul has emanated from the Creator and is in some way divine. The Plotinian movement is thus an attempt to recognize our divinity, and in so doing, to ascend to the One. See John J. O’Meara, *The Young Augustine*, 136 and A.H. Armstrong, “St. Augustine and Christian Platonism,” *Plotinian and Christian Studies* (London: Variorum, 1979), 3-4.

their gaze away from corporeal things and toward the incorporeal soul. Similarly, we see Augustine in *De Trinitate* arguing that humanity should withdraw from temporal things and direct its gaze to the image of God within, for “[i]t is his image insofar as it is capable of him and can participate in him.”<sup>18</sup> His hope is that this withdrawal into the highest part of humanity to contemplate the image of God within might be the means whereby he could raise himself to the sight of God himself.

It is not necessary to provide a detailed examination of Augustine’s conception of the interior movement, for what we are most interested in is his assessment as to whether this Neoplatonic-style withdrawal of the soul into itself can lead to the vision of God. Nevertheless, a brief description of this interior movement will be helpful. Having moved directly to the *mens*, the highest part of the soul, in books IX and X to formulate two mental trinities which, he suggests, could be the image of God in humanity – trinities to which he will return in book XIV – Augustine begins book XI by moving away from the inner person in order to concentrate directly on the outer person. His purpose in doing so is, quite simply, to lead the reader on a Plotinian quest that will take both him and the reader progressively inward, away from material things and toward locating and realizing the image of God in the soul. “We have grown so used to bodies,” Augustine writes, and it is for this reason that he looks for vestiges of the Trinity in the ‘outer man,’ both to help the weakened mind to understand the image of the Trinity within, as well as to take us to the place where this image can be realized and where God can be truly contemplated.<sup>19</sup> According to John Cavadini, what we have in books XI and XII is

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<sup>18</sup> *De Trin.*, XIV.11.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, XI.1: “[B]y the very logic of our condition, according to which we have become mortal and carnal, it is easier and almost more familiar to deal with visible than with intelligible things, even though the former are outside and the latter inside us, the former sensed with the senses of the body and the latter understood with the mind, while we conscious selves are not perceptible by the senses, not bodies that is, but only intelligible, because we are life. And yet, as I have said, we have grown so used to bodies, and our interest slips back and throws itself out into them in such a strangely persistent manner, that when it is withdrawn from the uncertainties of bodies to be fixed with a much more assured and stable knowledge on things of the spirit, it runs away again to those things and seeks to take its ease in the place where it caught

“nothing less than an attempt at a directed ‘ascent’...from the consideration of that which is created to the contemplation of – the Plotinian *noesis* – the Creator.”<sup>20</sup> In these books Augustine utilizes Plotinian themes and processes in a sustained attempt to ascend to the vision of God wherein God will be seen and thus understood.

Thus, utilizing Plotinus’ conception of interiority and ascent, Augustine withdraws into the innermost part of the soul, the *mens*, to contemplate the image of God. However, whereas he suggested in *De Quantitate Animae* that this inward movement was the means whereby the ascent of the soul could be realized, his attempt at ascent through interiority in books XI and XII of *De Trinitate* ends in failure. How and why Augustine understands this attempt to be unsuccessful will be the focus of this section. As shall be noted, it is in book XII that he focuses specifically on the detrimental effects of sin on human potentiality, and much of what he writes in this book is similar to his treatment of sin in *Confessiones*. In the chapter above, I argued that, in *Confessiones*, Augustine appears to understand human attachment to created things to be the result of wrongly-ordered love rooted in pride. In book XII of *De Trinitate*, this conception of wrongly-ordered love is elaborated upon and described in greater detail, and it is this conception which will be analyzed in this section.

In book XII Augustine concentrates his efforts on the innermost part of the soul, to the *mens*. He spends the first part of the book describing the difference between the ‘inner man’ and the ‘outer man’; the latter being the subject of discussion in book XI. Augustine’s definition of the outer man is fairly simple: it is that aspect of ourselves which we have in common with other animals, and he here refers specifically to sensory perception.<sup>21</sup> In contrast to this outer man, Augustine formulates a conception of the

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its disease. Well, we have to adapt ourselves to this illness, and when we are trying to distinguish inner spiritual things as accurately and to propound them as simply as we can, we must take lessons in comparison from these outer bodily things.”

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.*, 105.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, XII.1.

inner mind which he separates into two distinct but united faculties. The lower part of the mind is defined by Augustine as being that aspect capable of making judgments concerning what is “like truth” in bodily things, and it is this lower part which has charge over temporal and bodily affairs; Augustine writes that this part of the mind is concerned with knowledge (*scientia*).<sup>22</sup> Connected to this lower part is the higher, and it is this part that is capable of making judgments “according to non-bodily and everlasting meanings,” and is therefore that part of the mind capable of contemplating unchanging and eternal things; Augustine writes that this part of the mind is concerned with wisdom (*sapientia*).<sup>23</sup> According to Augustine, the image of God is located in this higher part of the mind:

[A] trinity has to be discovered in the whole nature of the mind in such a way that if on the one hand temporal activity stops – it is only for this that an assistant is needed and that something of the mind is drawn off to administer these affairs – this trinity is found in one quite simply undivided mind; and if on the other hand one makes this distribution of functions, only in that part which is concerned with the contemplation of eternal things can one find something that is not only a trinity but also the image of God; while in the part that is drawn off for temporal activity one may perhaps find a trinity, but certainly not the image of God.<sup>24</sup>

Augustine has thus led himself and his readers into the innermost part of the soul – the *mens* – and directed his gaze to that higher part of the soul in which the image of God is to be found. However, while Augustine makes a distinction between a higher and a lower part of the mind, he emphasizes that there is a unity between these parts,<sup>1</sup> and this conception is important in understanding his perception of the impact of sin on human potential. In the following quotation Augustine describes this impact utilizing an allusion to Adam and Eve to illustrate how the higher and lower parts of the mind have been corrupted due to the fall:

But through that reason which has been delegated to administer temporal affairs [i.e., the lower part of the mind] he may slide too much into outer things by making unrestrained

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., XII.2

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., XII.4.



advances; and in this the active reason may have the consent of her head; that is to say the reason which presides as the masculine portion in the control tower of counsel [i.e., the higher part of mind] may fail to curb her. In such a case the inner man grows old among his enemies, demons and the devil their chief who are jealous of virtue and the sight of eternal things is withdrawn from the head himself as he eats the forbidden fruit with his consort, so that the light of his eyes is no longer with him.<sup>25</sup>

Just as Eve succumbed to the temptation of the serpent, thereby causing Adam to succumb to the same temptation, so the lower mind with its administration of temporal affairs has been corrupted to utilize temporal and bodily things in a perverted manner that does not “refer them to the highest good as their end.”<sup>26</sup> Temporal and bodily things are now loved and used purely for “self-enjoyment” in a prideful attempt to gain “an illusory happiness.”<sup>27</sup> And the consequences of this wrongly-ordered love are drastic, as the above quotation illustrates. Whereas the higher part of the mind was created to contemplate eternal realities, and thus to know God himself, the sin of the lower part of the mind – a sin of which, according to Augustine, the higher part of the mind is guilty because it fails to control the lower part – causes the higher part of the mind to lose the function for which it was created.

In order to understand why Augustine conceives of the drastic consequences of sin in this way it is worthwhile to discuss briefly what he writes about love in books VIII and IX. In book IX Augustine makes a distinction between two forms of love, charity and covetousness, and suggests that the difference between the two is found in the way in which humanity relates to created things: “[I]f that love is related to the creator it will no longer be covetousness but charity. It is only covetousness when the creature is loved on its own account. In this case it does not help you in your use of it, but corrupts you in your enjoyment of it.”<sup>28</sup> Rightly-ordered love, Augustine argues, is defined as being a love of something in such a way that God is loved through it. That is to say, as

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., XII.13.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., XII.17.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., IX.13.

Augustine writes in book VIII, we love a good thing rightly when we love the Good that causes an object to be good. In contrast, wrongly-ordered love, defined by Augustine as covetousness, is the love of something in such a way that it is loved selfishly for one's own enjoyment.

It is this latter love, based on the prideful enjoyment of self, that has so damaged the image of God in humankind according to Augustine in book XII. He describes the problem as follows:

What happens is that the soul, loving its own power, slides away from the whole which is common to all into the part which is its own private property. By following God's directions and being perfectly governed by his laws it could enjoy the whole universe of creation; but by the apostasy of pride which is called the beginning of sin it strives to grab something more than the whole and to govern it by its own laws; and because there is nothing more than the whole it is thrust back into anxiety over a part, and so by being greedy for more it gets less. That is why greed is called the root of all evil. Thus all that it tries to do on its own against the laws that govern the universe it does by its own body, which is the only part it has a part-ownership in. And so it finds delight in bodily shapes and movements, and because it has not got them with it inside it wraps itself in their images which it has fixed in the memory. In this way it defiles itself foully with a fanciful sort of fornication by referring all its business to one or other of the following ends: curiosity, searching for bodily and temporal experience through the senses; swollen conceit, affecting to be above other souls which are given over to their senses; or carnal pleasure, plunging itself in this muddy whirlpool...It drags the deceptive semblances of bodily things inside, and plays about with them in idle meditation until it cannot even think of anything divine except as being such, and so in its private avarice it is loaded with error and in its private prodigality it is emptied of strength.<sup>29</sup>

There are two facets of the above quotation that deserve attention. The first has to do with the cleaving nature of love, and humanity's inordinate attachment to created things. As was the case in *Confessiones*, Augustine understands love in *De Trinitate* to be the glue which attaches the lover to the thing loved.<sup>30</sup> Thus, he argues that when the soul loves temporal things without referring "them to the highest as their end" – i.e., when we fail to recognize and love the Good within created things – humanity becomes so united to temporality that it loses all ability to contemplate non-temporal and unchangeable

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., XII.14-15.

<sup>30</sup> For instance, in book VIII Augustine consistently refers to love as having a cleaving or clinging force. Cf. *ibid.*, VIII.4; VIII.5; VIII.10.

realities.<sup>31</sup> Whereas rightly-ordered love is rooted in humility, in that the soul recognizes its own createdness and weakness and directs all love through created things to the Creator of all things, wrongly-ordered is rooted in pride, in that the soul longs to utilize and enjoy created things in such a way as to make itself a god over its possessions; indeed, Augustine writes in book XII that the human attempt to control and own temporal things is an attempt to be like God, acting under submission to nobody.<sup>32</sup> In an act of pride – manifested as greed, superiority, or as a desire for pleasure – the soul looks to and loves created things as good in and of themselves without reference to the uncreated Creator. The soul sets its end in these created things, Augustine writes, and utilizes them selfishly so as to obtain happiness and fulfillment in them. Thus, the prideful soul directs its focus away from the Creator and looks instead only to created things, finding its joy in these objects, continually contemplating and loving them in such a way that it ceases to be able to contemplate that which is not bodily. Through this inordinate love of temporal objects the soul “wraps itself in their images”<sup>33</sup> and “clutches them to itself.”<sup>34</sup> Consequently, the soul becomes unable to think about anything else, losing the faculty, associated with the higher part of the mind, to contemplate divine realities altogether. And, according to Augustine, the soul cannot “go up again, having squandered and lost its strength.”<sup>35</sup>

There is a second facet of Augustine’s description of the fall deserving of attention having to do with his understanding of the communal consequences of sin. The prideful soul, Augustine writes, is a lover of its own power, “rejoicing at the possession of it or inflamed with the desire for it.”<sup>36</sup> Augustine is clear that through this act of

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., XII.17.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., XII.16.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., XII.14.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., X.7. Here Augustine writes the following about the soul’s inordinate love of temporal things: “Now these things are bodies

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., XII.16.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., XIII.17.

selfish love, this attempt to imitate God, the soul stands against God by looking to created things rather than to him for ultimate fulfillment. What Augustine is equally clear about in book XII is that this act of selfish love also causes a person to stand, not only against God, but against his/her fellow human beings. The movement caused by sinful pride, according to Augustine, is a movement away from that which is held in common toward the private, “away from the whole which is common to all into the part which is its own private property,” away from compassion to greed.<sup>37</sup> Instead of loving others by humbly submitting to them, the prideful soul is hungry “to be above other souls.”<sup>38</sup> It is thus guilty, Augustine emphasizes, not only of avarice and prodigality, but of *private* avarice and *private* prodigality.<sup>39</sup> Not only is the prideful soul deeply fragmented due to its inordinate love of temporal things, a love that has caused the higher part of the mind to be paralysed, wrapped as it is in a multiplicity of bodily images from which it cannot release itself, the prideful soul has also caused the fragmentation of community whereby humanity is no longer united. Rigid individualism thus marks Augustine’s portrait of fallen humanity in book XII, a point also made in *Confessiones*, albeit implicitly. The significance of this portrayal of fallen humanity will be explored in greater detail below when we examine Augustine’s conception of the role of the church in the attainment of the vision of God. At this juncture, it is sufficient simply to point out that Augustine understands the fall of humanity to have communal consequences which, as he will have occasion to write in the following books, need to be addressed for the vision of God to occur.

We have reached a crucial point in understanding Augustine’s conception of the vision of God in *De Trinitate*. In books IX through XII he led his readers into the drama of Plotinus’ interiority and ascent, withdrawing into the soul to locate the image of God

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., XII.14.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., XII.14.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., XII.15.

in the hope that this inward movement might be the means whereby the vision of God – and thus understanding of God – could be attained. However, when Augustine guides his gaze and that of his readers away from corporeal things toward the soul, he ‘discovers’ the image of God to be bruised and beaten, damaged and distorted by sin. He is led to the realization that the faculty of the *mens* concerned with the contemplation of divine things is so weak that the contemplation of God is not possible by the soul’s own efforts. No longer one psychologically or ontologically, no longer one with its neighbours, the fallen soul finds itself unable to reverse this fragmentation to ascend to the God of all things.

“So here we are,” Augustine writes, “after exercising our understanding as much as was necessary, and perhaps more than was necessary in these lower things, wishing and not being able to raise ourselves to a sight of that supreme trinity which is God.”<sup>40</sup> Although he has endeavoured to ascend to the vision of God – and thus attain the knowledge of that which he believes – his attempt ends in failure. That he arrives at this conclusion regarding human potential to see God in this life is little surprising for those who have read through the whole of *De Trinitate*. As early as book I, the reader finds Augustine stressing that humanity is incapable of contemplating divine truths, and that it is for this reason that we have been given signs and symbols to allow us to understand by knowledge what we cannot contemplate by wisdom.<sup>41</sup>

Nevertheless, Augustine never wavers from his understanding that the end-goal for the Christian is the vision of God. For Augustine, the ascent must occur in some way, but unlike the Neoplatonic philosophers, he suggests that the soul does not have the capability to purify itself and so ascend to the vision. That said, the question we must ask

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<sup>40</sup> *DeTrin.*, XV.10.

<sup>41</sup> I.4, p. 67. “[T]hey are themselves unable to gaze upon it [the divine light] and grasp it for the good reason that the human mind with its weak eyesight cannot concentrate on so overwhelming a light, unless it has been nursed back to full vigor on *the justice of faith* (Rom 4:13).” Some, like John Cavadini, suggests that book I was written after all the other books were written, and thus is meant to foreshadow the conclusions which Augustine will come to throughout *De trinitate*. See *op. cit.*, p. 107.

is this: If purification does not come through interior withdrawal, how does Augustine understand purification to occur so that the Christian can attain the vision of God? I will suggest that the answer is largely found by examining Augustine's conception of the soteriological role of the Holy Spirit in books XIV and XV of *De Trinitate*. Of course, Augustine does have a great deal to say about the efficacy and necessity of the incarnation for the ascent of the soul, but the essence of this understanding of that doctrine is contained in *Confessiones* and I have dealt with it in the previous chapter. What is not discussed at great length in *Confessiones*, as we have seen, is the purifying role of the Holy Spirit. However, as shall be seen in the following discussion, Augustine discusses the soteriological role of the Holy Spirit at much greater length in *De Trinitate*, and indeed posits the Spirit to be of crucial importance for the Christian's ascent to the vision of God. It is to this idea that I now turn.

#### **Book XV: The Holy Spirit as the Love Between the Father and the Son**

To understand the role of the Holy Spirit in the attainment of the vision, as Augustine defines it in *De Trinitate*, it is necessary that we examine briefly Augustine's conception of the Holy Spirit as the love shared between the Father and the Son, which is described in detail in book XV. As will become apparent as we examine the role of the Spirit in guiding believers to the attainment of the vision of God, it is fundamentally important for Augustine that charity be distinctively appropriated to the Holy Spirit.

Augustine begins his argument for referring to the Holy Spirit as the love between the Father and the Son by referring to the economic activity of the Spirit described in scripture: "According to the holy scriptures," Augustine writes, "this Holy Spirit is not just the Father's alone nor the Son's alone, but the Spirit of them both."<sup>42</sup> He is here merely repeating what he had already established in book IV in which, arguing on the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., XV.27.

basis of texts such as John 14.26, 15.26, and 20.22, he argued that scripture declares that the Spirit was sent by both the Father and the Son.<sup>43</sup> For Augustine this scriptural understanding of the Spirit as sent by the Father and the Son provides the basis from which he can assert that the Spirit can legitimately be understood to be the communion, or love, between the two. Given his assumption that the way in which God reveals himself to creation is connected to the way in which God is immanently, and because scripture states, according to Augustine, that the Spirit is sent by both the Father and the Son, it appears clear to Augustine that the Spirit must proceed from both immanently.<sup>44</sup> Since scripture and the Catholic faith also emphasize the unity of God, Augustine argues that one can logically and faithfully understand the Spirit as the communion of Father and Son, uniting the two in a bond of love.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, according to Augustine the Spirit is demonstrated to be “the common charity by which the Father and the Son love each other,” and it is this point that Augustine is most desirous to express in this section of book XV.<sup>46</sup> The same point was made by Augustine in book VI where he explicitly refers to the Spirit as love, and as

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<sup>43</sup> Here Augustine writes: “And just as being born means for the Son his being from the Father, so his being sent means his being known to be from him. And just as for the Holy Spirit his being the gift of God means his proceeding from the Father, so his being sent means his being known to proceed from him. Nor, by the way, can we say that the Holy Spirit does not proceed from the Son as well; it is not without point that the same Spirit is called the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. And I cannot see what else he intended to signify when he breathed and said *Receive the Holy Spirit* (John 20:22). Not that the physical breath that came from his body and was physically felt was the substance of the Holy Spirit; but it was a convenient symbolic demonstration that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son as well as from the Father.”

<sup>44</sup> See *ibid.*, IV.29, 32.

<sup>45</sup> This appears to be the logic of Augustine’s argument in *ibid.*, V.12 (see also VI.7). See also David Coffey, “The Holy Spirit as the Mutual Love of the Father and the Son,” *Theological Studies* 51 (1990), 197-199. While Coffey is not especially sympathetic to Augustine’s trinitarian speculation, he does concede that Augustine’s argument for understanding the Spirit as the communion between the Father and the Son is logical and consistent with the scriptural evidence that the Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son. I agree with Coffey’s sentiments in this regard. Where he disagrees with Augustine is where the latter moves from viewing the Spirit as the communion between the Father and the Son to seeing the Spirit as the mutual love between the two. It seems to me that the ‘leap’ which Coffey suggests Augustine makes from communion to mutual love is not nearly as large as Coffey conceives it to be. It is very difficult indeed to develop a notion of intimate communion without understanding the basis for such communion to be love. While Coffey suggests that not all communion is based upon love, he does not provide examples.

<sup>46</sup> *DeTrin.*, XV.27.

such, the Spirit is the unifying force between the Father and the Son.<sup>47</sup> Augustine takes this concept up once again in book XV and argues that, while charity is to be predicated substance-wise of God – meaning that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all understood to be substantively charity – it is appropriate to suggest that “the Holy Spirit is distinctively named charity.”<sup>48</sup>

However, Augustine is not willing to argue this claim apart from the testimony of scripture, and therefore, while he admits that scripture does not explicitly state that the Holy Spirit is charity, he suggests that scripture makes this connection implicitly. According to Augustine, it is on the basis of the economic activities of the Spirit, as attested by scripture, that we are justified in distinctively appropriating charity to the Spirit. To make this case he relies especially on 1 John 4.10-13<sup>49</sup> and Romans 5.5.<sup>50</sup> The former passage contains a number of references to the love God has for humanity, a love made manifest in the incarnation and death of his Son (4.10). Such love, according to the epistle, spurs the believer on to love one another (4.11), and such love for one another is made possible by the indwelling of God (4.12). Because John previously referred to God as love in 4.8, Augustine suggests that it is God as love who dwells within, compelling us to love. As such, 4.13 – “By this we may know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit” – suggests to Augustine that John has the Spirit in mind when referring to the indwelling love of God: “So it is the Holy Spirit of which he has given us that makes us abide in God and him in us. But this is precisely what love does.”<sup>51</sup> Augustine’s conception of the unifying power of love has already been

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<sup>47</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, VI.7.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, XV.29.

<sup>49</sup> “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.”

<sup>50</sup> “...and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”

<sup>51</sup> *DeTrin.*, XV.31.



discussed above in relation to the soul's inordinate attachment to created things. Given this understanding of love, and given the fact that 1 John 4.10-12 dwells on the importance of love, Augustine argues that the basis of the union between God and humanity described in 1 John 4.13 must be love. And because John emphasizes that it is by the Holy Spirit that God and humanity are united, Augustine suggests that charity is here being distinctively appropriated to the Holy Spirit. Moreover, Romans 5.5 refers specifically to God's love being "poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us."<sup>52</sup> This text, according to Augustine, clearly illustrates that scripture distinctively appropriates charity to the Holy Spirit.

Augustine then moves on at this point to argue that, because the Holy Spirit has been given to us, he is also distinctively to be viewed as the gift of God for us. "Why is the Spirit," Augustine asks in XV.32, "distinctively called gift?"<sup>53</sup> His answer to this question is important, for in it he provides his reader with his conception of the soteriological role of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is called gift, he argues, because it is through the impartation of the Spirit that one is made "a lover of God and neighbor."<sup>54</sup> "Other endowments too are given through the Spirit," Augustine acknowledges, "but without charity they are of no use."<sup>55</sup> Although one may speak in tongues, have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries, these endowments are as nothing without charity. Furthermore, even if one gives away everything one has, even if one becomes a martyr for the faith, if these things are done without charity "it does him no good."<sup>56</sup> Most

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<sup>52</sup> In *De Spiritu et Lettera*, also written late in his career, Augustine often utilizes Romans 5.5 to base his claim that it is through the Spirit that humanity is able to love. See for instance 9.xviii. Referring to the summary of the law as being love of God and neighbour, Augustine writes: "This law is not written on tables of stone, but is shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit which is given to us. Therefore the law of God is charity...[W]hen charity itself is shed abroad in the heart of believers, we have the law of faith, the Spirit giving life to the lover." Unless otherwise noted, all translation of *De Spiritu et Littera* are from *Augustine's Later Works*, John Burnaby, trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965).

<sup>53</sup> *De Trin.*, XV.32.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

importantly, even if one “has all faith so as to move mountains,” if that faith is not accompanied by charity it is as nothing.<sup>57</sup> “Faith there can indeed be without charity,” Augustine writes, reminding his readers of Galatians 5.6 and James 2.19, “but it cannot be of any use.”<sup>58</sup> Only by love, he concludes, a “love which is from God and is God,” can the believer be brought to eternal life in which God will be seen as he is. Only by the Holy Spirit, who is the gift of God, can believers have “the charity which brings us through to God, without which no other gift of God at all can bring us through to God.”<sup>59</sup>

#### **Book XIV: The Reordering of Human Love by the Spirit in the Context of the Church**

This conception of the Holy Spirit as love is an integral aspect of Augustine’s understanding of the renewal of the image of God in humanity; a renewal that must occur, he argues, in order to attain the vision of God for which all humanity longs.<sup>60</sup> For, as Augustine argues in book XIV, since the image of God within humanity has been damaged by wrongly-ordered love, the restoration of that image must occur through rightly-ordered love. I will now examine book XIV, particularly XIV.15-26, in which Augustine discusses the renewal of the image and the attainment of the vision of God. In particular, I will demonstrate that the Spirit plays a crucial role in the renewal of the image and the eventual attainment of the vision of God. I will further argue that this emphasis on the Spirit translates into an emphasis on the necessity of the church as the practical manifestation of the Spirit’s renewing work. In the process, I will be hearkening back to Augustine’s conception of the Spirit in book XV, and developing ideas found there.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, I.3, 5, 16, 17; XIV.20, 23, 25.

In the first half of book XIV Augustine discusses the image of God. It is not necessary here, nor is it possible, to provide a detailed description of his conception of the image.<sup>61</sup> It suffices to mention that Augustine here suggests, as he did in book X, that the image of God in humanity may be found in the fact “that the mind always remembers, always understands and loves itself.”<sup>62</sup> This trinity of the mind, he suggests, may be said to be the image of God because this trinity is not adventitious to the mind and because each facet of this trinity is coexistent with the mind in that the mind is said always to remember, understand, and love itself. However, as soon as Augustine posits this threefold structure of the mind’s self-relatedness as the image of God in XIV.14, he immediately retracts his words at the beginning of XIV.15, and instead writes the following about the true image of God: “This trinity of the mind is not really the image of God because the mind remembers and understands and loves itself, but because it is also able to remember and understand and love him by whom it was made. And when it does this it becomes wise.”<sup>63</sup> The image of God, Augustine suggests, “was created with a capacity for him and able to share in him.”<sup>64</sup> Because the mind always remembers, understands, and loves itself it has the capacity to remember, understand, and love God.<sup>65</sup> “The image, in other words, is *not* the mind’s self-relatedness,” writes Rowan Williams commenting on book XIV, but “is realised when the three moments of our mental agency all have God for their object.”<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> One of the best resources for understanding Augustine’s conception of the image of God is John Edward Sullivan’s work *The Image of God: The Doctrine of St. Augustine and its Influence* (Dubuque, Iowa: Priory Press, 1963). See especially chapter four.

<sup>62</sup> *DeTrin.*, XIV.9.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, XIV.15.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> John Edward Sullivan, *op. cit.*, 144.

<sup>66</sup> Rowan Williams, “*Sapientia* and the Trinity: Reflections of the *De Trinitate*,” *Collectanea Augustiniana* (Louvain: Leuven University Press, 1990), 319.

The problem, Augustine writes, is that the mind does not remember, understand, and love God, with the result that the mind is foolish.<sup>67</sup> Remembering, understanding, and loving only itself, the mind pridefully sets itself as the object of its focus independent of God. But, Augustine maintains, when the mind does this it cannot be said actually to remember, understand, and love itself at all, and he makes this point in the context of discussing what it means truly to love God. The love of God, according to Augustine, is referred to more in the scriptures than the remembrance and understanding of God, and indeed the “most important and well known of these texts is the commandment, *You shall love the Lord your God* (Mt 22:37; Dt 6:5).”<sup>68</sup> However, the mind that is distorted by sin does not love God, and because the mind pridefully seeks that which will cause it harm when it seeks to find its enjoyment in created things, the mind can be said to hate itself because it does what is against its own interest. Furthermore, this depraved desire for that which is to the mind’s disadvantage demonstrates that the mind has indeed “forgotten itself,” as Augustine writes in book X.<sup>69</sup> The consequences of this depraved desire is that “we have a trinity of stupidity, whose members are self-forgetfulness, self-ignorance, and self-hate.”<sup>70</sup>

Once again, as he did in book XII, Augustine discusses the human dilemma as being one of wrongly-ordered love. It is at this point in the book that he begins his ruminations on the renewal of the image of God within humanity, a renewal which culminates in “the perfect vision of God.”<sup>71</sup> Central to his conception of humanity’s purification is his understanding of the soteriological role of the Holy Spirit.

According to Augustine it is the Spirit who enables humanity truly to remember God: “But when the mind truly recalls its Lord after receiving his Spirit,” he writes, “it

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<sup>67</sup> *DeTrin.*, XIV.15.

<sup>68</sup> *DeTrin.*, XIV.18.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, X.7. See also John Edward Sullivan, *op. cit.*, 138.

<sup>70</sup> John Edward Sullivan, *op. cit.*, 138.

<sup>71</sup> *DeTrin.*, XIV.23.

perceives quite simply – for it learns this by a wholly intimate instruction from within – that it cannot rise except by his gracious doing, and that it could not have fallen except by its own willful undoing.”<sup>72</sup> In the paragraphs preceding this statement, Augustine refers to the omnipresence of God and maintains that, because “all things are in him,” humanity can be reminded of its God even when it appears to have forgotten him.<sup>73</sup> However, even though a human being cannot be “without him in whom he is,” Augustine paradoxically suggests that one who does not remember, understand, and love God cannot be said to be “with him” in any substantial way.<sup>74</sup> The omnipresence of God does not ensure that humans will be “reminded of him and turn back to the Lord.”<sup>75</sup> Rather, Augustine appears to argue that humanity can only recall its God through the bestowal of the Holy Spirit that will allow one to be ‘with’ God.<sup>76</sup>

But how does the Spirit accomplish this task? I would argue that, when the above quotation regarding the Spirit and the recollection of the Lord is read in the light of what he writes in books IV and XIII, Augustine appears to contend that the Spirit appropriates the effects of the incarnation to human beings. In both books IV and XIII Augustine argues that the incarnation of the Son was the most “suitable way of curing our unhappy state.”<sup>77</sup> And in both, Augustine explains this suitability by suggesting that, in order for us to be brought from mortality to immortality we first “had to be persuaded how much God loved us, in case out of sheer despair we lacked the courage to reach up to him,” and second, we had to be reminded that we cannot progress to God through a prideful

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., XIV.21.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., XIV.16.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.: “It is man’s great misfortune not to be with him without whom he cannot be. Obviously he is not without him in whom he is; and yet if he fails to remember and understand and love him, he is not with him.”

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., XIV.17. See also XIV.21.

<sup>76</sup> John Edward Sullivan, *op. cit.*, 140: “When he talks of being ‘with’ God, Augustine is not speaking [*sic*] any recall of God, but of a special one which flows from the presence of the Spirit, and his gifts.”

<sup>77</sup> *DeTrin.*, XIII.13.

assessment of our own ability, but that the path to God is found in humility.<sup>78</sup> While the prideful philosophers “think that they can purify themselves for contemplating God and cleaving to him by their own power,” these people can only attain a brief glimpse of “the light of unchanging truth.”<sup>79</sup> We are reminded here of Augustine’s attempt to ascend to the vision of God in book VII of *Confessiones*. As we saw in *Confessiones*, here too, in *De Trinitate*, Augustine explains that the incarnation teaches humanity that it cannot ascend to the vision of God by its own power by demonstrating that, in order for humanity to ascend to God, God had to descend to humanity. Furthermore, God’s descent to humanity demonstrates the “humility of God,” and the self-giving love God has for human beings.<sup>80</sup> In response to this ultimate act of humility, Augustine posits that we are to respond with faith, which he understands to be “a kind of humiliation of the intellect.”<sup>81</sup> It is through faith that we come to the humble realization of our inability to contemplate God, and it is through faith in the humble temporal Word made flesh – “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”<sup>82</sup> – that we are led along “more endurable routes” for our weakened state.<sup>83</sup>

Given what Augustine writes in books IV and XIII about the efficacy of the incarnation, and in particular, about how the incarnation teaches humanity that it is loved and that it is too weak to ascend to the divine apart from Jesus Christ as mediator, his statement in book XIV that humanity recalls its Lord and so recognizes its own weakness through the bestowal of the Holy Spirit appears to illustrate that the work undertaken by the incarnate Word is appropriated through bestowal of the Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit “the mind truly recalls its Lord,” and by this statement it would seem that

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., IV.2. See also XIII.13 where the same point is made.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., IV.20.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., IV.4.

<sup>81</sup> This is how Edmund Hill rightly describes Augustine’s conception of faith. See “Unless You Believe, You Shall not Understand: Augustine’s Perception of Faith,” *Augustinian Studies* 25 (1994), 60.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., XIII.24.

<sup>83</sup> *De Trin.*, I.3.

Augustine is emphasizing that the Spirit, as the Spirit of the Father and the Son, reveals the entire Godhead to the mind. Because each person of the Trinity is “each in each and all in each, and each in all and all in all,”<sup>84</sup> when the Spirit is bestowed to humanity the entire Trinity is in fact bestowed as well so that, as Augustine writes in XV 32, through the Spirit “the whole triad dwells in us.”<sup>85</sup> In other words, whereas the mind is capable of some form of recollection of God because of the omnipresence of God as mentioned above, the indwelling Spirit of the Father and Son is a special revelation whereby the mind is able ‘truly’ to recall its Lord in that the Spirit reveals the entire Trinity to it.

That this revelation of God by the Spirit to the mind serves to instruct the mind of its inability to ascend to the divine apart from “his gracious doing” is due to the particular role the Spirit plays in the Godhead.<sup>86</sup> As the “charity by which the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father” – this is how Augustine describes the Spirit in book XV – the indwelling Spirit reveals to humanity a God who is, in his very essence, self-giving and loving.<sup>87</sup> The Spirit, he argues, is the “communion or fellowship” which binds the Father and Son in an eternal exchange of self-surrender.<sup>88</sup> He is the love actively given by the Father to the Son and from the Son to the Father, and as the self-giving love of Father to Son and vice versa, he is coeternal with the Father and the Son; he is, in Augustine’s words, “both God and from God.”<sup>89</sup> This conception of the Spirit as the communion of the Father and the Son is acknowledged to be one of the most difficult aspects of Augustine’s thought, and it is not my intention, nor is it possible in this chapter, to explicate this idea thoroughly.<sup>90</sup> The point I wish to make is that Augustine

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., VI.7.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., XV.32.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., XIV.21.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., XV.37.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., V.12. See also VI.7.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., XV.36.

<sup>90</sup> Rowan Williams, *op. cit.*, 327: “The Spirit is ‘common’ to Father and Son (xix.37, xxvi.47, xxvii.27) not as a quality characterising them equally, an impersonal attribute, but as that active divine giving, not simply

posits an understanding of divinity that is necessarily relational because, as Rowan Williams appropriately writes, “to be God at all is to be desirous of and active in *giving* the divine life.”<sup>91</sup> The Holy Spirit, as the love between the Father and the Son, is the manifestation of divine selflessness and humility, in that God exists as a community which, in his trinitarian essence, is eternally self-giving. Thus, Augustine is arguing in XIV.21 that it is God as love – the Holy Spirit – who causes the mind to recall its Lord, for by the Holy Spirit humanity is given the gift of love that is from God and God himself. The result of this divine gift of God himself is that human beings, when confronted with God as love, come to recognize themselves both as weak creatures who have fallen through wrongly-ordered love, and as creatures who are deeply loved by God who has become incarnate for them and has given of himself in the person of the Holy Spirit.

However, Augustine is clear that this divine love, which is the Holy Spirit, is not passive. “Man has no capacity to love God except from God,” Augustine writes in book XV, meaning that we cannot raise ourselves to the contemplation of God by our own efforts.<sup>92</sup> It is thus the Holy Spirit – who, we have seen as Augustine emphasizes repeatedly throughout *De Trinitate*, is the charity of God that has been poured into our hearts – who allows us to redirect our wrongly-ordered love so that God can be truly loved and so that we can “abide in God and him in us.”<sup>93</sup> Without this love, without the Holy Spirit, humanity has no means of rightly-ordering its love. Distorted by sin, humanity can rightly love only by the Holy Spirit who is himself the self-giving love of the Father and the Son, and it is as this love that the Holy Spirit empowers believers to imitate the love selflessly shared by the Father and the Son. And this redirection of

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identical with the person of the Father, which the Father communicates to the Son to give in his turn (xxvi.47-xxvii.48). This is perhaps the most difficult aspect of Augustine’s thought in Book XV.”

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 325.

<sup>92</sup> *De Trin.*, XV.31.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.



wrongly-ordered love through the love that is the Spirit is, according to Augustine, the means by which the Spirit purifies human beings of their prideful attachment to created things. The indwelling Holy Spirit confronts us with an understanding of God as utterly self-giving, and in response to this revelation, weakened humanity is fired through the Spirit “to the love of God and neighbor,” and is thereby gradually purified and renewed in preparation for the vision of God.<sup>94</sup> As love the indwelling Spirit compels us to love, and in so doing we are transformed.

This notion will be explored in greater detail shortly when I examine the practical manifestation of the Spirit’s purifying work within the church. The point that should be emphasized is that Augustine is here emphasizing that the purification that leads to the attainment of the vision of God cannot occur through the Neoplatonic process of interiority because the love the mind has for temporal objects is so strong that it can no longer withdraw and make itself out among the myriad of images to which it has become attached.<sup>95</sup> Rather, the purification required to attain the vision of God is not based on human endeavour, but is the work of him who is the gift of God whose gifts to us – and in particular the gift of love – “are merits by which we arrive at the supreme good of immortal happiness.”<sup>96</sup> The image of God, as we have seen Augustine argue in book XII, has been corrupted as a result of pride and this pride manifests itself in covetous love of temporal things from which humanity cannot escape. Consequently, Augustine posits that the only means by which the image of God can be renewed and purified is through a humility that manifests itself in selfless love of things whereby God is loved above all. Only through love, therefore, can humanity be purified and the vision attained, and it is this love that is given in and through the Spirit by whom the charity of God is shed abroad in the hearts of believers. The Spirit, writes Augustine, “was given to us when

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., XV.31.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, X.7.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., XIII.14.

Jesus was glorified in his resurrection” in “order that faith might work through love,”<sup>97</sup> for “even faith is only rendered of any use...by charity.”<sup>98</sup> Therefore, it is only through the purifying work of the Spirit who is love that humanity is purified and the vision of God is attained.

We have seen that the Spirit can accomplish this task because he is the love shared between the Father and the Son who is lovingly bestowed to humanity. But how does Augustine understand this purifying work of the Holy Spirit to be practically accomplished? The answer is to be found in books XIV and XV in which, as shall now be examined, Augustine argues that the Holy Spirit renews the damaged image of God within community, in an ecclesiastical setting.

Augustine makes clear in books XIV and XV, and indeed throughout *De Trinitate*, that the love of God cannot be separated from the commandment to love our neighbour as ourselves. Central to his conception of loving one’s neighbour as oneself is his emphasis on what it means to love oneself rightly, which has already been briefly discussed above. As was noted, Augustine posits that to love oneself rightly is to want that which is not to the mind’s disadvantage, and that when the mind wants something that is to its disadvantage it can be said rightly to hate itself.<sup>99</sup> The prideful love of temporal things of which the mind is guilty, whereby the mind covetously clings to temporal things in order to become ‘god’ by exercising selfish control over them, actually translates into the mind hating itself, for by such love the mind is made weak and is separated from him in whom is found true happiness. In order for the mind to love God, therefore, the mind must humbly relinquish its attempts at control over temporal things, and over other people, and recognize its own weakness and inability to ascend to God

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., XIII.14.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., XV.32.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., XIV.18.

apart from divine grace, a recognition that occurs, as was noted, “when the mind truly recalls its Lord after receiving his Spirit.”<sup>100</sup>

To love God, therefore, is to love oneself rightly, and when one loves oneself rightly, Augustine maintains that the mind can love one’s neighbour rightly. To love oneself “with a straight, not a twisted love” is not only to love oneself as weak and incapable of rising up to God, but it is to love oneself as a creature loved by the God who reveals himself as love itself.<sup>101</sup> When the charity of God is spread abroad in our hearts through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the mind comes to recognize itself as a creature loved by a God who imparts himself to us, and as already noted, the Spirit thus fires the mind to love God who is, in his very essence, love. And “when the mind loves God, and consequently as has been said remembers and understands him,” Augustine writes, it can rightly be commanded to love its neighbor as itself<sup>102</sup> doing so, as he emphasizes in book XV, by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>103</sup>

While Augustine does not spell out exactly what this love of neighbour entails, it seems that this love of the other is to approximate the self-giving love of God made manifest in the incarnation and in the sending of the Holy Spirit. In book VII, Augustine emphasizes that Jesus Christ is not only the mediator between temporality and eternity, but he is the supreme example whom we are to imitate in our daily lives. Having “emptied himself” by “taking the form of a servant,” Jesus Christ is the living embodiment of divine humility and love, and as such he is the “model for those who can see him as God above, a model for those who can admire him as man below; a model for the healthy to live by, a model for the sick to get better by.”<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, the Holy

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., XIV.21.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., XIV.18.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., XV.32.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., VII.5.

Spirit – the charity of God – reveals to humanity a God who, as triune, exists in an eternal exchange of self-giving love.

Therefore, if, as Augustine suggests, the vision of God is attained through the renewal of the image of God so that the image finally bears “God’s perfect likeness,” then the process of renewal occurs through the imitation of God’s self-giving nature, and such imitation occurs through the love of neighbour in community.<sup>105</sup> In contrast to the prideful love of created things which causes people to retreat into a rigid individualism that sets them apart from both God and neighbour, the love which the Spirit spreads abroad in the hearts of believers is a humble love that recognizes the foolishness of private, prideful ownership over created things, and instead recognizes that human beings must humbly renounce their preoccupation with temporal things which have their origin in God. Daniel Day Williams describes Augustine’s understanding of wrongly-ordered love and its communal consequences in the following terms: “The source of disorder is the soul’s turning toward the love of lesser things, and this comes from a desire to imitate God, that is, to be God, to dominate others, and to win honours and praise through our influence upon them.”<sup>106</sup> In contrast to this state of affairs, he posits that true love of neighbour as oneself consists in a humble self-giving love that enables one to view the other person as one views oneself; that is, as a creature loved by God.<sup>107</sup> And through the practice of this self-giving love, shared in community, the image of God is purified and renewed by the Holy Spirit who enables the believer to imitate the self-giving love of God.

In filling believers with the love of God, therefore, the Spirit brings about the formation of community by empowering people to love God and neighbour rightly. In

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., XIV.23.

<sup>106</sup> *The Spirit and the Forms of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 56.

<sup>107</sup> As Robert Innes writes, “Augustine’s rational order suggests that neighbours are to be loved in accordance with the value placed by God upon them.” Cf. *op. cit.*, 79.

this community, believers are bound one to another through the selfless love of God which is the same love that unites the persons of the Trinity in complete and total mutuality. Loving each other with the love that is shared between the Father and the Son, believers “imitate this mutuality by grace both with reference to God and to each other.”<sup>108</sup> “[B]y this gift,” Augustine writes with reference to the Spirit, “we are one with each other, with him we are one spirit (1 Cor 6:17), because our *soul is glued on behind him* (Ps 63:8).”<sup>109</sup> Humbly submitting one to another, loving oneself and the other as creatures loved by God, the believer imitates God whose essence is love, and is thus reformed and renovated by the Spirit who fires them to this love of God and neighbour.

The purification necessary for the attainment of the vision of God, therefore, is not a purification undertaken individually through the solitary interior withdrawal of the soul into itself, whereby the individual cleanses themselves and so makes an ascent of the alone to the Alone, as Plotinus suggested; this individualistic understanding was rejected early on by Augustine as was demonstrated in his reference to ‘Mother Church’ in *De Quantitate Animae*. In *De Trinitate* this emphasis on the necessity of the ecclesiastical community, in which the Spirit is the gift of love that empowers believers to love, is developed even further. Referring to the many gifts given by the Spirit that St Paul lists in 1 Corinthians 12.4-11 and 13.1-3, gifts which are given to those who make up the body of Christ, Augustine in XV.32 emphasizes, as does St Paul, that all of these gifts are useless without the love that is both from God and is God. “Unless therefore the Holy Spirit is imparted to someone to make him a lover of God and neighbor,” Augustine writes, “he cannot transfer from the left hand to the right hand.”<sup>110</sup> Only through love, a love that Augustine appears to suggest in XV.32 is made manifest in the community of the church, can believers be purified so as to attain the vision of God for which they long.

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<sup>108</sup> *DeTrin.*, VI.7.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *DeTrin.*, XV.32.

The gift of the Holy Spirit, he writes, “is distinctively to be understood as being the charity which brings us through to God, without which no other gift of God at all can bring us through to God.”<sup>111</sup>

As can be seen, therefore, while Augustine emphasizes that the vision of God will be attained eschatologically – I will refer to this idea below – his understanding of the means by which the vision is attained is distinctly ‘this-worldly’ in a manner that his conception of the attainment of the vision in *De Quantitate Animae* was not. In the latter, as was demonstrated, Augustine emphasizes that the vision can be attained only through the rejection of this world whereby the soul endeavours to slough off the body as much as is possible. One withdraws from all things into one’s soul, and through this process of interiority the soul trains itself to reject the corporeal by directing its gaze toward that which is incorporeal. Mention is made, of course, of the importance of ‘Mother Church’ in the attainment of the vision, and his understanding of the church prefigures, in some ways, the conception we find in *De Trinitate*. Nevertheless, the emphasis in *De Quantitate Animae* is on the renunciation of this world in the hope that it can be transcended even in this life. In *De Trinitate*, however, purification is not attained through a process of interiority but through the everyday interactions of people who are not trying to escape this world in this life, but who are preparing themselves, through the love of the Holy Spirit, for the attainment of the vision of God in the world to come when, in the community of the angels and saints, believers will see God as he is. Both the process of purification and the final attainment of the goal, therefore, is understood to take place within the context of others, and is not a goal toward which one strives in solitude.

Furthermore, this conception of preparing for the vision of God, not through the intellectual purification of interiority, but through the love of neighbour illustrates, as was

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

the case in *Confessiones*, Augustine's concern to formulate a spirituality for the many, and not just for the few. While he acknowledges that there may be some learned philosophers who have, on the basis of their great learning and love of wisdom, been able to catch a brief glimpse of the divine through interiority,<sup>112</sup> Augustine is clear that this vision is as nothing compared to the eternal vision of God shared by those who have humbled themselves before God and others, purified by the humility of loving faith rather than by the pride of philosophical knowledge. It is, in other words, an egalitarian conception of the attainment of vision promulgated by Augustine in *De Trinitate*, and one which has as its focus the purification of the whole through the love of the whole in this life.

#### **The Attainment of the Vision Eschatologically Through Daily Advances in Love**

Before concluding this chapter, it is necessary briefly to discuss Augustine's conception of the attainment of the vision itself which, as mentioned above, he understands to take place eschatologically. Humanity cannot, Augustine suggests in *De Trinitate*, attain the perfect vision of God in this life because of the damage caused to the image of God through wrongly-ordered love. The image does not bear God's perfect likeness because it has so entangled itself in corporeal things that it cannot see God: "[B]y sinning man lost justice and the holiness of truth," Augustine writes, "and thus the image became deformed and discolored."<sup>113</sup> While Augustine maintains that the believer is granted complete forgiveness of sins in the renewal that ~~that~~ comes from baptism into the church, this is but a "first stage of the cure."<sup>114</sup> "[T]he second stage," he writes, "is curing the debility itself, and this is done gradually by making steady progress in the

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., IV.20.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., XIV.22

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., XIV.23.

renewal of this image.”<sup>115</sup> Therefore, the complete renewal of the image of God, a renewal that is perfected through the final attainment of the vision of God, occurs “by daily advances,” and according to Augustine, the believer makes these advances through the love that is from God and is God.<sup>116</sup> He characterizes this daily renewal in the following words:

So then the man who is being renewed in the recognition of God and in justice and holiness of truth by making progress day by day, is transferring his love from temporal things to eternal, from visible to intelligible, from carnal to spiritual things; he is industriously applying himself to checking and lessening his greed for the one sort and binding himself with charity to the other. But his success in this depends on divine assistance; it is after God who declares, *Without me you can do nothing* (Jn 15.5).<sup>117</sup>

Thus, by divine assistance – and given Augustine’s emphasis on the Spirit as love, it would appear that he has the Spirit in mind in the above quotation – the believer gradually learns to love rightly, and as has been discussed above, this process of rightly ordering love occurs through the Spirit in the context of the loving community of the church.

The reward for those who apply themselves “industriously” in the task of renewal, Augustine writes, is the attainment of the vision of God in the hereafter:

When the last day of his life overtakes someone who has kept faith in the mediator, making steady progress of this sort, he will be received by the holy angels to be led into the presence of God he has worshiped and to be perfected by him and so to get his body back again at the end of the world, not for punishment but for glory. For only when it comes to the perfect vision of God will this image bear God’s perfect likeness. Of this the apostle Paul says, *We see now through a puzzling reflection in a mirror, but then it will be face to face* (1 Cor 13:12). Elsewhere he says, *But we with face unveiled looking at the glory of the Lord in a mirror are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory as by the Spirit of the Lord* (2 Cor 3:18); this is what is happening from day to day to those who are making good progress. And the apostle John says, *Beloved, we are now sons of God, but that which we shall be has not yet appeared. We know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is* (1 Jn 3:2).<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., XIV.23.



Those who have made “steady progress” in their faith in the mediator, which, as Augustine emphasizes in XV.32, is a faith that works through love, attain the eternal vision of God whereby they are perfected as they worship God “face to face.”<sup>119</sup> Through love we are gradually transformed to become like God, and through love, we will attain the complete perfection found in the attainment of the vision of God. That is to say, through the purification that comes through the Holy Spirit humanity is gradually renewed, for it is through the charity that is the Spirit that we are brought “through to God” eschatologically to enjoy him in a face to face vision that will last eternally.<sup>120</sup> While Augustine does not deny that one can, as he and his mother did, attain a brief glimpse of the divine, the emphasis in *De Trinitate* is on the eschatological fulfillment of this vision made possible by the love of God.

## Conclusion

I have, in this chapter, attempted to demonstrate the development of Augustine’s conception of the attainment of the vision of God in relation to that formulated in *De Quantitate Animae* and *Confessiones*. In *De Quantitate Animae*, while there is no mention of the Holy Spirit, mention is made of the role ‘Mother Church’ plays in guiding believers toward the attainment of the vision of God, but this role is not clearly defined. In *Confessiones*, we find Augustine examining the human dilemma in the context of a discussion of the detrimental effects of pride, manifest in the inordinate and wrongly-ordered love the soul has for temporal things. The role of the Spirit in redirecting this love is briefly discussed in *Confessiones*, and while the fact that Augustine enjoyed a brief glimpse of God with his mother at Ostia can, I think, legitimately be interpreted as an implicit suggestion that the attainment of the vision is not solitary but is one that is achieved in the context of community, he never makes this idea explicit.

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., XIV.26.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., XV.32.

In *De Trinitate*, however, both of these ideas are made explicit, and are developed to a greater extent than is found in either of the two works examined above. Far from developing an immature and poorly constructed pneumatology, as some of Augustine's critics have suggested,<sup>121</sup> Augustine posits a dynamic and relational conception of the Trinity which enables him to argue that the cure for humanity's wrongly-ordered love is found in the love that is the Holy Spirit, the love generously shared by Father and Son given by the Trinity to humanity at Pentecost. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, humanity is empowered to love God, and correspondingly, to love neighbour, and in the process it is purified and cleansed of the prideful and wrongly-ordered love of which all humanity is guilty. Through the self-giving love of God, believers themselves become self-giving, and united by the bond of love with the triune God and with one another, the image is gradually renewed and restored in this life until it attains the eternal face to face vision of God. To put this idea another way, through love the community of the church is raised to the community that is God as three. Perhaps the best way to end this chapter is by quoting Rowan Williams' insightful observations regarding *De Trinitate*, observations which succinctly illuminate the main points I have endeavoured to highlight above. He writes:

In the economy of salvation, the contemplative vision of Father and Son that is the work and the identity of the Spirit (God's love loving the love of God) is worked, realised, in creatures, as they are drawn out of their distance from divine love to share the relation between Father and Son, and so themselves to live in the bond of *caritas* with each other – the bond of love which is the life of the Church.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Cf. Colin Gunton, "Augustine, the Trinity, and the Theological Crisis of the West," *Scottish Journal of Theology* (43:1990), 51-52; Catherine LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and the Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 97ff.

<sup>122</sup> *Op. cit.*, 329.

**Concluding Remarks:**  
**The Development of Augustine's Conception of the Vision of God**

In this thesis, I have sought to outline and analyze the development of Augustine's conception of the attainment of the vision of God in the forty years spanning the composition of *De Quantitate Animae* and the completion of *De Trinitate*. In all of these works, as I mentioned in the introduction, the vision of God plays a prominent role and in each Augustine discusses how humanity is to attain this vision which alone can bring true happiness. But each work also demonstrates the evolution of Augustine's conception of the means by which the vision of God is attained, and it has been my purpose above both to demonstrate the existence of this development and to analyze how and why such development occurred.

In my analysis of *De Quantitate Animae* it was noted that Augustine's emphasis on interiority as the path of ascent to the vision bears some resemblance to that found in the writings of the Neoplatonists, specifically of Plotinus. However, despite the fact that Augustine clearly borrows the concept of interiority from Neoplatonism he does make some significant alterations to it, effectively Christianizing it in the process. Thus, we find in *De Quantitate Animae* an emphasis on the necessity of divine assistance which is made possible in the context of 'Mother Church' through the incarnation of the divine Son of God. This stress on divine assistance illustrates that Augustine, at this early post-conversion period of his life, largely rejected Neoplatonism's assessment of the soul's potentiality and instead posited an understanding of the attainment of the vision of God that takes into account the weakness of the soul that is caused by its inordinate attachment to corporeal things. However, as was noted above, Augustine's emphasis on divine assistance is also coupled with an insistence on the soul's greatness with the result that Augustine appears to formulate a synergistic conception of the attainment of the vision whereby the soul, by virtue of its power and capabilities, is capable of participating in its

own purification and is aided in this task by God. This positive assessment of the soul's potentiality leads Augustine to suggest that the soul can attain a sustained and fulfilling vision of God in this life, and can do so by rejecting the corporeal world entirely by returning into itself to gaze upon its own power and beauty. Augustine's references to 'Mother Church' and to the incarnation are significant for they demonstrate Augustine's insistence that these two play an integral role in the soul's ascent to God. However, precisely how the church and incarnate Son enact this role is ambiguously formulated in *De Quantitate Animae*. While Augustine's references to the church and the incarnation contain, in nascent form, ideas that will become important in his later works, the means by which the two provide assistance to the soul so that it can ascend to God is not clearly defined.

In *Confessiones*, however, Augustine provides a much clearer conception of the role the church and the incarnate Son play in humanity's ascent to the divine. The emphasis in books VII and IX of *Confessiones* is on the weakness of the soul to a degree not found in *De Quantitate Animae*. Humanity, he writes, does not have the strength to enjoy God in a sustained manner, and the reason for its weakness is pride which swells shut the eyes of the soul making it incapable of contemplating eternal things. This pride leads humanity to love physical objects in and of themselves without reference to the creator with the result that the soul becomes hopelessly attached to these things, unable to break free. The human dilemma is thus characterised by Augustine in *Confessiones* as wrongly-ordered love which has its basis in the pride of selfishness, and this is a far more explicit and damning portrayal of human weakness than we find in *De Quantitate Animae*, in which Augustine never speaks of pride or of the detrimental effects of pride, nor does he speak of wrongly-ordered love as being a problem in need of correction. He does refer to the soul's attachment to corporeal things as a problem of misplaced desire,

but he clearly does not understand such desire to be as strong a force as the love he writes of in *Confessiones*.

The emphasis placed on human weakness in *Confessiones* is coupled with a more fully developed conception of the efficacy of the incarnation for humanity's ascent to God. Being both divine and human Jesus Christ is understood by Augustine to be the mediator between God and humanity whereby those who humbly submit to the mediator are carried across the chasm separating eternality and temporality by him who is both eternal and temporal. The incarnation, Augustine suggests, demonstrates to us the humility of God, and furthermore, it demonstrates to us that the path of ascent to the vision of God is one characterised by humility. The weakness of Christ, a weakness undertaken for the sake of humanity, clearly teaches us that we are weak, and that the ascent to the vision of God cannot be made through the prideful confidence that, Augustine now maintains, serves as the basis of Plotinian-style interiority. Rather, the vision is attained through the submission of the self to Jesus Christ who heals the wounds caused by prideful love, and who thus purifies humanity for the eschatological vision of God which will be enjoyed eternally; no longer does Augustine understand the vision to be attainable in this life. The means by which the mediator purifies, Augustine writes, is by nourishing or nurturing the love of believers, by which he appears to mean that Christ rightly orders the wrongly-ordered love of prideful humanity. Augustine thus posits an understanding of the attainment of the vision of God that revolves around the necessity of divine assistance which practically manifests itself in the healing love of Christ – a possible reference to the Holy Spirit – who re-orders the wrongly-ordered love that plagues all humanity. Furthermore, Augustine's account of the vision at Ostia in book IX seems to demonstrate an insistence by the bishop on the importance of the loving ecclesiastical community in the midst of which humility and love reign, and in which Christ purifies believers. We find, therefore, in *Confessiones* a more developed

conception of human sinfulness as a problem of wrongly-ordered love, of the importance and role of Jesus Christ in the attainment of the vision of God, and of the role the church plays in the purification of the believer.

Augustine builds on these ideas in *De Trinitate* in which he continues to work within a conception of the human dilemma as wrongly-ordered love, and indeed, in which he develops this notion. In book XII Augustine provides a lengthy and detailed account of the damaged human condition, and there is much in this book that mimics that already written in *Confessiones* about wrongly-ordered love. However, the language he used about the damage caused to the soul as a result of its attachment to corporeal things is more strongly worded. Furthermore, he goes into more detail in book XII regarding the communal consequences of sin. The movement caused by sinful pride is not only a movement away from the eternal to the temporal but is also a movement away from the common toward the private, away from compassion and toward greed. Wrongly-ordered love thus not only deeply fragments the individual by making them incapable of contemplating eternal things, but it also fragments community by promoting power over justice.

This emphasis on the individual, as well as the communal, consequences of wrongly-ordered love leads Augustine to posit an understanding of humanity's ascent to the vision of God that stresses, as was the case in *Confessiones*, the divine re-ordering of human love. However, in *De Trinitate* Augustine explicitly connects this re-ordering of love to the work of the Holy Spirit who is understood by Augustine to be the love shared by the Father and the Son in an eternal exchange of self-giveness. The Holy Spirit, according to Augustine, is the person of the Trinity who is most distinctively to be called 'charity' because he is the love shared by the Father and the Son as well as the love bestowed to humanity. It is thus by the Spirit that believers are fired to love God and neighbour, and it is by the Spirit that the hearts of believers are stirred to transfer their

love away from the temporal to the eternal. Through his bestowal to believers, he reveals to us a God who lives in an eternal exchange of love and reveals to us that we are ourselves loved by God. And we are empowered to return this love through the Spirit who is both the love given by God and God himself. The purification of human beings, therefore, a purification that Augustine understood to be achieved through interior withdrawal in *De Quantitate Animae*, is now posited to be the work of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, Augustine argues that the purifying love of God cannot exist without love of neighbour, and he suggests that it is by the Spirit that we learn to love our neighbour. The re-ordering of human love thus has communal consequences and Augustine maintains that is in the church that believers are trained to love others as themselves; that is, as creatures loved by God. The Spirit enables us humbly to submit one to another, and through this exchange of self-giving love in community, Augustine argues that the church lives in imitation of the mutuality of God who himself exists in a community of three united by the bonds of love. The church is thus understood in *De Trinitate* to play an integral role in the ascent of humanity to the vision of God, a role not explicitly formulated or developed in *De Quantitate Animae* or in *Confessiones*.

It is by the Spirit, therefore, that both the individual and communal consequences of wrongly-ordered love is transformed, and this transformation, Augustine argues, is one that necessarily takes the whole of one's life. The vision of God is thus placed entirely within an eschatological framework by Augustine who maintains that the face to face contemplation of the Trinity will be the reward of those who have lived by faith working through love in the context of the church. This vision of the triune God, who exists in a community united by the bonds of love, is attained, Augustine argues, by those who have been purified by this same love in the ecclesiastical community which is to manifest the divine love of God. The community that is God, therefore, is enjoyed and seen eternally by the community that imitates God in this life.

The development of Augustine's conception of the attainment of the vision of God is, in conclusion, a development which sees him moving steadily away from a positive understanding of human potentiality toward a conception of the drastic consequences of human fallenness which is directly related to wrongly-ordered love, and away from an emphasis on interiority as a means of purification and toward an understanding of God as purifier in and through the Spirit, whereby the individual is purified through the collective purification of the community manifesting the love that is the Holy Spirit. A more pronounced and nuanced conception of the role of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and of the community of the church in the attainment of the vision of God thus characterises the evolution of Augustine's conception of humanity's ascent to the divine. This development also finds Augustine placing progressively less emphasis on the attainment of the vision of God in this life, instead emphasizing the eschatological fulfillment of the vision of God. However, this emphasis on the attainment of the vision in paradise is coupled, seemingly paradoxically, with a formulation of the attainment of the vision of God that is 'this-worldly.' Purification does not come through a rejection of this world, as Augustine suggests in *De Quantitate Animae*, but comes through the everyday interactions of believers who are preparing themselves for the eternal vision of God through the imitation of God in this world. The attainment of the vision of God eschatologically thus has significant implications for life in this world, for the vision of God is reserved as an eternal reward to those who have been purified by the Spirit of the Father and the Son in the context of the church.



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