

## Augustine and the Counsel of Compassion in the Spiritual Life

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In his essay, The Theory of Moral Sentiments, the eighteenth century political economist, Adam Smith made the following comment:

All men, even those at the greatest distance, are no doubt entitled to our good wishes.... But if, notwithstanding, they should be unfortunate, to give ourselves any anxiety upon that account, seems to be no part of our duty.

Adam Smith's dictum was quoted (with considerable nuance and reservation) in a recent article in the Financial Post (July 7, 2004) in a study on the feasibility and sustainability of aid projects to the African continent. Fourteen centuries earlier, an African, found occasion to consider the underlying issues concerning one's duties towards others of the human family, both near and far. Augustine of Hippo's treatment of the topic can be found in two of his most enduring works, De doctrina christiana and Confessiones. Augustine's reflections were focused on the double commandment, love of God and neighbour in the context of the maturing of the spiritual life.

In the mid to late 'nineties of the fourth century, Augustine, the newly consecrated bishop of Hippo in Roman North Africa embarked on one of the most creative periods of his life as an author. It was a time marked by continuities and discontinuities in his thought. The continuities can be traced throughout his re-thinking of issues already present in his writings since the time of his conversion, some ten years before. The discontinuities

challenge his readers to grasp the import of what he himself announces as new perspectives – insights, intuitions, illuminations – that will be seminal for his thought in the thirty years ahead. While the significance of the shifts in Augustine’s interpretation of Paul’s Letter to the Romans rightly claims the attention of scholars of this period of his episcopacy, there is another area of biblical interpretation which also illustrates the swift maturing of his spiritual and intellectual vision during these years. This is the theme of the spiritual ascent/return to God.

Augustine had focused on this theme many times in his early writings, both before and during his priestly ministry, but his reflections in the works of his early episcopacy, are specially marked by an elaborate interweaving the commandment of love of God and neighbour into the theme of the graduated ascent to God. The first of these reflections is in De doctrina christiana Book II, where he treats the topic, the counsel of compassion consilium misericordiae as the fifth step in the ascent to true wisdom. The second reflection on misericordia is in “days” three, four and six of the allegory on the opening chapters of Genesis in Book XIII of the Confessions.

### The Counsel of Compassion in De doctrina christiana

Augustine had been drawn to comment on the gifts of the Spirit in Isaiah 11:2 in a number of earlier writings, but what is new in his treatment of the topic in Book II of De doctrina christiana is the context – a careful study of the role of reading the scriptures in the maturing of the spiritual life. In chapter 6 of Book II, Augustine turns to the role of figurative language in scripture:

It is a wonderful and beneficial thing that the Holy Spirit organized the holy scriptures so as to satisfy hunger by means of its plainer passages and remove boredom by means of its obscurer ones. (R.P.H.Green Augustine De doctrina Christiana 63. II,6,8,15)

The reference to the admirable wisdom of the Holy Spirit leads him to consider in some detail the ascent to wisdom in the frame of “seven steps”, the first step being fear of the Lord and the seventh step, wisdom. Within the elaboration of the seven steps Augustine provides his readers with a brief, but evocative reflection on the fifth step, the spiritual gift of counsel which Augustine particularizes as the counsel of compassion consilium misericordiae (Green the “resolve of compassion”65). “Here he strenuously occupies himself with the love of his neighbour and becomes perfect in it” Hic vero se in dilectione proximi naviter exercet in eaque perficitur – to the point of loving one’s enemy (65. Book II, 7,11, 21) . The strenuous exercise of loving one’s neighbour is obviously a central theme in Augustine’s sermons and scriptural commentaries, twinned as it is in his thought with the love of God. However the careful analysis of the integration of the “counsel/resolve of compassion”, specifically as the exercise of love of one’s neighbour, into the seven steps of the spiritual ascent to God is a revealing insight into the distinctiveness of Augustine’s understanding of spirituality. It is far from a disembodied ascent of the one to the One of the philosophical ascent, rather it is an embodied, en-corporated pilgrimage to the Beloved, ever accompanied by neighbours near and far.

While the context of the reflection on the “seven steps” to wisdom is the role that the scriptures play in the maturing of the spiritual life, the central focus is the love of God and neighbour. Of the seven “steps”, Augustine will turn his attention, most deliberately to that of the third step – knowledge, since this is most pertinent to the purpose of the De doctrina christiana , the interpretation and communication of the riches of scripture for the community.

After these two stages of fear and holiness comes the third stage, that of knowledge ad tertium venitur scientiae gradum that of knowledge with which I now propose to deal. This is an area in which every student of, the divine scriptures exerts himself, and what he will find in them is quite simply is that he must love God for himself, and his neighbour, as himself - in other words, that his love of his neighbour, like his own self-love should be totally related to God.

(Green, 65 Book II, 7, 10, 18)

At this point Augustine deliberately turns back to Book I (chapter 22) where he has argued that the litmus test for interpretation of the scriptures is how such interpretations are conducive toward love of God and neighbour:

(I have dealt with these two commandments in the previous book, in my discussion of things). It is vital that the reader first learns from the scriptures that he entangled in a love of this present age, of temporal things, that is and is far from loving God and his neighbour to the extent that scripture prescribes. has been drawn far away from such a love for God and such a love for his neighbour as scripture enjoins. (Green, 65. Book II, 7. 9. 18)

Having established the centrality of the double commandment of love of God and neighbour for the reading of scripture, Augustine proceeds to comment on the seven steps to wisdom, and typically begins with emphasizing humility as the ground of the ascent of the spiritual life: “by nailing our flesh to the wood of the cross as it were crucify all our presumptuous impulses”( Green, Book II, 7, 11, 18).. Pietatis (translated as “holiness” by Green), the second step, teaches that “to ponder and believe that what is written there, even if obscure, is better and truer than any insights that we may gain by our own efforts” (Green, 65, Book II, 7, 11, 21). The third step, knowledge, following on fear of the Lord and piety, “makes person with good reason to hope not boastful but remorseful; in this state he obtains by constant prayer the encouragement of divine assistance, so that he is not crushed by despair. And so he begins to be at the fourth stage – that of fortitude hoc est fortitudinis – which brings a hunger and thirst after justice” (Green, 65. Book II, 7, 10, 18).

At this point of his reflection on the graduated ascent to wisdom, Augustine turns to emphasize the process of detachment that has been occurring in the first four “steps”: “In this frame of mind he extricates himself from all the fatal charms of transient things, turning away from these he turns to the love of eternal things, namely the unchangeable unity which is also the Trinity incommutabilem scilicet unitatem eandemque trinitatem (Green, 65. Book II, 7, 10, 20). He now approaches the next step which he names as the “resolve of compassion”. One approaches this fifth step with a keen awareness of the enormity of the distance between the pilgrim soul and the “Trinity in unity”:

When he beholds this light (as far as he is able to), shining as it does even into remote places, and realizes that because of the weakness of his vision he cannot bear its brilliance, he is at the fifth stage – that is in the resolve of compassion, and purifies his mind, which is somehow turbulent and feuding with itself because of the impurities accumulated by its desire of what is inferior. (Green, 65. Book II, 7, 11. 21).

Here we have a foreshadowing of the sixth step – that purity of heart needed for the serene contemplation of God, but this fifth phase of the ascent, far from demanding a withdrawal from sentient things in order to plunge oneself in contemplation, is a call to the immediate and practical exercise of love of neighbour through the counsel/resolve of compassion:

Full of hope now, and full of strength, since he has come to love even his enemy he rises to the sixth stage in which he now purifies the eye by which God may actually be seen – to the extent he may be seen to those who, to the best of their ability, die to this world... (Green, 67. Book II, 7, 11, 22).

The fifth and sixth step form a tight unity of thought centered upon the process of purification “So that this holy person will have a heart so single-minded and purified that he will not be deflected from the truth either by an eagerness to please man or by the thought of avoiding any of the troubles which beset him in this life. Such a son ascends to wisdom which is the seventh and last stage, enjoyed by those who are calm and peaceful (Green, 67. Book II 7, 11, 23).

In his reflection on the seven steps of the ascent of wisdom, Augustine has reiterated his teaching about the goal of scripture to call the community to love of God and neighbour as elaborated in Book I. At the same time what is significant is his unusual treatment of the gift of counsel as consilium misericordiae, the counsel of compassion, which he announces as the fifth step of the ascent to wisdom, a step that introduces the final stages of the ascent as a phase of purification: “for they see to the extent that they die to the world, and to the extent that they live in it they fail to see” (7, 11, 23) . In Augustine’s thought, this phase of purification is indissolubly linked with the diligent exercise of love of neighbour, an insight which militates against a “dematerialization” of the spiritual ascent. The insistence on the exercise of misericordia, as love of neighbour, in the final stages of the ascent underlines the profoundly incarnational roots of Augustine’s understanding of spirituality, once more emphasizing the difference he draws between the Platonist and the Christian notion of salvation in Book VII. 9. 13 of the Confessions.

#### Misericordia in Book XIII of the Confessions

Augustine was to explore the theme of the spiritual ascent and/or the return to the Origin in a much more sustained and spectacular mode in the other great work of the same period, the Confessions. It is the final book of the Confessions that we can follow his on-going reflection on the role of misericordia in the maturing of the spiritual life. These reflections can be found within another seven-fold pattern, in this case the seven days of creation. Here in Book XIII Augustine does not speak of the “counsel of

compassion”. Rather he draws a careful distinction between the gifts and fruits of the Spirit with respect to the exercise of compassion, misericordia. What links his reflection in the Confessions to that of the De doctrina christiana is the integration of the role of the exercise of compassion within a graduated ascent to the peace of the Sabbath (XIII 35.50).

Augustine’s reflections on misericordia in Confessions XIII are more elaborate than in Book II of the De doctrina christiana, and are explored in the series of allegorical commentaries on the days of Creation: “day” three with respect to the seed-bearing grasses and the fruit-bearing trees, “day” four concerning the need to distinguish between gifts and fruits of the Spirit and “day” six with particular attention to the command “to increase and multiply”. Perhaps it is not without significance that Book XIII begins with an invocation: “Upon you I call, O God, my mercy” Invoco te, deus meus, misericordia mea (James O’Donnell. Augustine Confessions I Introduction and Text 184, Book XIII 1,1). In the graduated bestowal of the gifts of existence, form and finally beatitude, Augustine sees in the “days” of creation the pattern of the pilgrim soul in its ascent to God, with every phase being marked with the goodness and mercy of the Creator. The call to “re-formation” in the image and likeness of God is a call to imaging this goodness and mercy in our own lives: “Conform yourselves no longer to the standards of this world, but allow yourselves to be reformed by the renewal of your minds” (M. Boulding, 189. Book XIII, 13, 14, Rom 12:2).

### Day Three

In his commentary on day three, Augustine focuses on the emergence of the “dry land”, “dry” in its thirst for God: “Their thirst you quench from the sweet waters of your secret fountain, that the earth may yield its increase” (Ps 84:13) ... and yield it does: at the command of its Lord and God the soil of our souls grows fertile in works of mercy according to its kind.” Germinat anima nostra opera misericordiae secundum genus (O’Donnell, 191; Boulding, 286. XIII, 17, 21) From day one where the Spirit hovers over “the dark chaos of our inner being” (Boulding, 284. XIII, 14, 15) so that already in “our pilgrim way” we are children of light – in hope – on to day two with the vault of scripture overhead “with such efficiency to persuade me to confession, to gentle my neck under your kindly yoke” (Boulding, 285. XIII 15, 17) Augustine had drawn his readers to day three and the “soil of our souls” growing fertile in works of mercy. There are analogies with the development of the five steps in the ascent to wisdom in the De doctrina christiana – the role of hope, in spite of, or rather because of, the awareness of sin and continuing fragility, and especially the centrality of love of neighbour. In day three, Augustine once again speaks of compassion:

...we fructify in love of our neighbour by assisting them in their bodily needs, for having seeds of similar kind within ourselves we learn compassion from our own weakness. So we are impelled to succor the needy in the way we would wish to be relieved ourselves were we in the same distress. This means not only the easy provision that could be likened to seed-bearing grass; we may also be called upon to supply the stout, oak-like protection of a fruit-bearing tree, which in its benign strength can lift an injured person clear of the grasp of a powerful oppressor, and

furnish protective shade by the unshakable firmness of just judgment. (Boulding, 286, 7. XIII. 17. 21)

#### Day Four

In day four of the Genesis narrative, Augustine reflects of the role of the “luminaries” for the pilgrim community on earth. This section of the allegory is particularly dense in reference to questions of the maturing of the spiritual life especially with regard to the relationship between the active and the contemplative life which he sees as distinct, but co-related, both in the wider community of the church, as well as in the life of the individual:

Then may the swift dawn break upon us so that rising from this lowly crop of active works ista inferiore fruge actionis to the delights of contemplation in delicias contemplationis we may lay hold of the Word of Life above.

Boulding, 287 XIII 18, 22)

Just as he has carefully attended to the links between the various “steps” in the ascent to wisdom in the De doctrina christiana, taking time to recapitulate the distinct, but related, phases of the gradation of the ascent, so too in the “days” of Creation, does Augustine draw the reader’s attention to the interrelationship of the narrative as an image of the gradual maturing of the spiritual life. After the reflection on the seed-bearing grasses and the fruit-bearing trees springing up all over the land that has been watered from the secret spring in “day” three, he turns to reflect upon the establishment of the luminaries of the heavens as they light the earth and mark the seasons. The links between “day” three and “day” four are reinforced as he turns once again to love of neighbour:

And so I pray you, Lord: as you cause joy and strength to spring and grow,  
even so let the truth spring up: let it sprout from the earth, and let  
righteousness look down from heaven. Let us break our bread for the hungry  
and bring the homeless under our roof, let us clothe the naked and not spurn  
our own kin. When these fruits are burgeoning on earth, take heed and see  
that it is good. (Boulding, 287. XIII. 18.22)

For Augustine the links between “truth” springing from the earth of “day” three and  
“righteousness” looking down from heaven in “day” four are forged naturally from the  
psalms (see Ps 84: 12) which lie constantly at the horizon of his thought. The works of  
mercy are subsumed under the category of “truth” in the maturing of the spiritual life.  
But the intention behind the works of mercy which are referred to constantly in “day”  
four must be carefully scrutinized. Augustine notes the distinction between “souls  
devoted to the life of the mind and others preoccupied with sensible things” and this  
leads him to reflect upon the diversity of spiritual gifts (1 Cor 12: 7-11): “All of them  
work of the one and the same Spirit, Who allots appropriate gifts to different people as  
he wills and causes stars to shine out clearly for the benefit of all”(Boulding, 288. XIII,  
18, 23). At this point Augustine urges all to advance to spiritual maturing: “... But first  
you must wash, purge the wickedness from your soul...” (XIII, 19, 24) We see his  
insistent warning about the need for on-going purification in the spiritual life at the  
same time as there is diligent exercise of the works of mercy and the deepening of the  
contemplative aspects of the spiritual life, thus echoing the teaching of the fifth and  
sixth “step” in the ascent to wisdom in the De doctrina christiana.

Augustine, as consummate spiritual director of souls, insists on the purification of the “dry land” by uprooting all the vices and keeping the commandments: “Remember the rich man in the gospel who was seeking guidance from a good teacher as to what he ought to do to win eternal life” (Mt. 19: 16-22; XIII, 19, 24). Augustine concludes”

Then where do these rampant thorns come from, if your land is fruitful? Go and root out the wild clumps of avarice, sell your possessions, get yourself rich fruit by giving to the poor, for you will have treasure in heaven. If you want to be perfect, follow the Lord in the company of those to whom he speaks wisdom.... As for you, race of the elect, weaklings in the world’s esteem, who have left all to follow the Lord, march after him, you beautiful feet. (Boulding, 289. XIII, 19, 24, 25)

#### Day Five

“Day” five is focused on the “living things” brought forth by the waters. Here Augustine concludes his reflection with a reference to the dynamics of the maturing of the spiritual life:

This is what the creeping things and birds suggest to me at present, for even though people have been baptized and initiated and have submitted to these material sacraments, they would proceed no further did their souls not rise to a new level of spiritual life, and move on from elementary doctrine toward maturity. (Boulding, 291. XIII. 20. 28)

#### Day Six

The Genesis account of “day” six begins with the reference to the emergence of the “living creature”, distinct from the “living things” of “day” five. In the logic of his allegory, Augustine identifies the “living creature” as those made alive in Christ: “This creature no longer stands in need of baptism (“day one”)...nor does this creature demand prodigious miracles to prompt it to faith (“day” four) ... for already it is the believing earth ... (21.29) But Augustine adds a warning to those on the path of spiritual maturing that they are still vulnerable to the concupiscences – “monstrous savagery of pride”, “the luxurious inertia of self-indulgence” and “sham pretension to knowledge” (cf. 1Jn 2:16; see also Book X. 30.41-43.70):

Seek God and your soul shall live (Ps 68:33) and so the earth will bring forth a living creature; and again, Shape yourselves no longer to the standards of this world, (Rom 12:2) but restrain yourself from it. The soul that dies by craving lives by avoiding what it craves (Boulding, 292. XIII, 21, 30)

The call to re-formation (Rom 12:2) that we hear insistently introduces Augustine’s commentary of Genesis 1:26 “Let us make man according to our image and likeness” (Boulding, 294. XIII. 22.32). The commentary on this seminal text is rich and complex, but what is remarkable is the similarities it bears to the sixth “step” of the ascent to wisdom in the De doctrina christiana. In the context of the “steps” to wisdom, following the “step” of the counsel of compassion, Augustine identified the sixth “step”, (instead of “understanding”) as that of “purity of heart” whereby one aspires to the contemplation of the “Trinity in unity” (DDC II, 7, 11, 21). In his commentary on Genesis 1:26, Augustine

specifically refers to “understanding”: “A person thus made new considers your truth and understands it. . . . And since he has the capacity to understand, you teach him to contemplate the Trinity in Unity, the Unity that is Trinity. (Boulding, 294. XIII. 22.32)

After a long and detailed consideration of what it means to be “made new” in understanding, Augustine turns to Genesis 1:28 – the command to increase and multiply – a command which he finds puzzling: “What sort of mystery have we here?” With the obvious multiplication of all living and breathing creation, why is the command of multiplication addressed only to humankind? For Augustine “the mystery” is an invitation to seek the spiritual meaning of such a text. The blessing of “multiplication” for him is obvious, not only in “the works of mercy” and the abundance of “spiritual gifts bestowed for the good of all (XIII.24.37), but also in the “faculty and the power both to articulate in various forms something we have grasped in a single way in our minds, and to interpret in many different senses something we have read, which, though obscure, is couched in simple terms” (Boulding, 298. XIII 24. 37). Augustine’s reflection on the blessing of abundance continues through his commentary on the next verse of Genesis, verse 30, the reference to the provision of nourishment provided by the “seeding plants that grow on earth, and every tree that bears fruit yielding seed”, which belong to the terrestrial realm, the “dry land” that has been separated from the chaotic sea of unbelievers:

This accords with what we were saying earlier; that these fruits of the earth symbolize and represent in allegorical terms the works of mercy produced by fertile soil to meet the needs of this present life. The charitable Onesiphorus was

soil of this type, and you showed mercy to his household because he often relieved Paul's hardship and was not ashamed to consort with a prisoner. (2 Tm 1:16; Boulding, 299. XIII. 25.38)

This reference to Paul leads Augustine to a further reflection on the "works of mercy" as he explores the implications of Paul's criticism of some members of the Christian community: "But how disappointed he was over certain other trees which failed to bear him the fruit they owed: 'The first time I offered my defense', he says, 'no one stood by me. One and all, they left me in the lurch: may it not be held against them'" (2 Tm 4:16. Boulding 299, XIII, 25, 38). Augustine goes on to note that it is not only the neglect of the "works of mercy" that is "disappointing". It is not only the question of giving itself that must be attended to, but also the intention behind the giving. He reflects on the well-springs of Paul's joy in the Letter to the Philippians: "I am splendidly joyful in the Lord to see you putting forth new shoots of care for me. You used to show your care, but then you wearied" (Phil 3:19). Speaking more specifically about his mission to the Philippians, Paul comments: "Not that I seek your gift: All I seek is the fruit accruing to you." (Phil 4:17) Noting this comment of Paul, Augustine now explores the distinction between the act of giving and the "fruit" of the works of mercy.

Shifting carefully through the Pauline writing, Augustine has distinguished between simple giving and the intention behind the giving, or rather he distinguishes between simple gifts in the material order and a "work of mercy". The example that Augustine cites is the widow's giving of sustenance to the prophet Elijah; here the gift-giving is a

“work of mercy” since it springs from a heart that discerns the presence of the prophet.

(Boulding. 301.XIII 27.41; see 1 Kgs/3Kgs 17:6-16):

The gift consists in welcoming the prophet, welcoming the just person, and handing a cup of cold water to a disciple; but the fruit consisting in doing it precisely because the other is a prophet, or a just person, or a disciple....

When such people welcome your servants, offering them bodily refreshment or any kind of timely assistance in their daily lives, but without knowing why it should be done or what is implied, they do not truly feed their guests, nor are their guests fed by them, because no holy or upright will prompts the host’s actions, nor do your servants yet find in the gifts received any fruit over which to rejoice. So true is it that our spirit feeds on what gives it joy.

(Boulding 301. XIII 27.42)

Joy and delight and sweetness are constant themes in Augustine’s thought. They are not mere compensatory elements in the spiritual life, but an essential part of the dynamics proper to spiritual maturation. It is precisely at this point in his Genesis commentary (Gn 1:31 “the exceeding goodness of creation” XIII.28.43) that Augustine embarks upon a response to the goodness of creation. He draws attention to the importance of the perspective from which one views the world:

... some people do not find your creatures pleasing ... they hold... that these (the heavens and the earth) had already been created by some other power ... It is different for people who see creation through your Spirit, for you are seeing it through their eyes. Thus when such people see that these things are good,

you are seeing that they are good; whatever created things please them for your sake, it is you who are arousing their delight in these things; and anything that gives us joy through your Spirit gives you joy in us. (Boulding 302,3 XIII. 30.45,6).

### Conclusion

Augustine has not drawn up a systematic essay on “the counsel of compassion” in De doctrina Christiana, nor on the “works of mercy” in Confessions. What he has done is to have placed a series of insights on the role of compassion within an elaborate seven-stepped version of the ascent of the soul. It is a specifically Christian version of the philosophical model of the spiritual ascent in that it is based on specific biblical texts (Genesis, Isaiah) that it is insistent on the incarnational dimension of the Gospels and, above all, that it is sourced in the primary revelation of the opening chapter of Genesis, that materiality is blessed and a blessing for those who love all things – including their neighbours –from God’s perspective: “If then seeing something in God’s Spirit, they perceive it to be good, it is evidently not they, but God, who sees that it is good ... This means that God is loved in what he has made. But he could not be loved were it not through the Spirit he has given us, ‘because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit bestowed upon us’” (Rom 5:5; Boulding 303. XIII, 31, 46).

The love of God is made visible in the “counsel of compassion and the “works of mercy”. A gift of God, the diligent exercise of the love of neighbour – near and far- is more than a duty; it is at once an essential phase in the maturing of the spiritual life and the touchstone of authenticity in the ascent of the soul to God.

when he insists that in heeding the goodness of the burgeoning earth (“this lowly crop of active works) we are led to the “delights of contemplation” of the fullness of goodness in God: