

WEAVING THE STRANDS TOGETHER

A DECADE IN AUGUSTINE'S EUCHARISTIC THEOLOGY

In *Against Faustus* there is a succinct summary of Augustine's eucharistic theology in the late 390s: "Before the coming of Christ the body and blood of this sacrifice were foretold in like victims. In the passion of Christ the types [found in the Jewish scriptures] were fulfilled by the true sacrifice. After the ascension of Christ, this sacrifice is commemorated in the sacrament"¹). It is the intention of this essay to show that such a theology with its three essential elements — sign/sacrament, memory and sacrifice — would not have been possible without the development of those strands of Augustine's thought, and that that development took place over the last decade of the fourth century.

1. "This sacrifice is commemorated in the *Sacrament*".

Several years before *Against Faustus* was written 'sacrament' had taken on in Augustine's mind the meaning of 'sign' — a special kind of sign —, and it is to that notion that attention should first turn²). Augustine's understanding of sign has, of course, been much discussed, and it is unnecessary to canvass that discussion here. It is, however, relevant to the development of his eucharistic theology to point out that 'sign' had by 399 moved from primarily representing sensible objects to

¹) *Faust.* XX. 21. The whole passage reads: *Huius sacrificii caro et sanguis ante adventum Christi per victimas similitudinem promittebatur; in passione Christi per ipsam veritatem reddebatur; post ascensum Christi per sacramentum memoriae celebratur.*

²) By 396 sacrament had been defined as "a useful sign, divinely instituted" (*Doct.* III. 9. 13). The ambivalence of the word 'sacramentum' in Augustine's writings is generally recognized, and I have used the English 'sacrament' only where the reference is to one of the rites known in the later church in the narrower sense. Among the many studies that should be consulted in this area see H.-M. FERET, "Sacrament-res dans la langue théologique de S. Augustin", *RSPT* 29 (1940), 218-243; G. MADEC, *De Magistro*. Bibliothèque Augustinienne n° 4 (Paris, 1976), Notes complémentaires; A. MANDOUZE, "A propos de 'sacramentum' chez S. Augustin: Polyvalence lexicologique et foisonnement théologique", *Mélanges offerts à Mlle Christine Mohrmann* (Utrecht, 1963), 222-232; R. MARKUS, "St Augustine on signs", *Phronesis* 2 (1957), 60-83.

encompassing spiritual realities, past and present, as well. In keeping with this wider understanding Augustine emphasized the importance of reading the second group of signs in an appropriately 'non-carnal' way.

In *The Teacher* (389) Augustine's attitude to signs is only minimally positive. His concern, in delineating their nature, is to demonstrate the limitations of their function. Words constitute a particular kind of sign and operate as all signs do — they invoke the images stored in the memory of extra-mental realities³). Although he writes (without expanding the statements) that Jesus taught (presumably spiritual) realities by means of words, and that words can express truths known intellectually⁴), in this work the bulk of the examples given of things signified are realities which can be apprehended by the senses.

Only two years later Augustine is writing of sign/sacrament in a much more positive way and with much more attention to the role of signs in the knowledge of spiritual truths. There are mysteries in the scriptures which are signs of truth, we are told indirectly in *On True Religion*⁵). The key to the reason for this attitudinal shift is not hard to find; it is the locus of these signs — the scriptures — which gives them their character. Decret has well described Augustine's efforts, beginning with *On Genesis against the Manichees*, to refute the Manichean charges of Catholic obscurantism and materialism arising from the acceptance by Catholics of the canonicity of the Jewish scriptures. Turning the charge of materialism back on the Manichees, Augustine was able to insist that the correct (and Catholic) interpretation of those scriptures was that of spiritual understanding, not the carnal understanding of Manichees⁶).

By identifying the mysteries found in the scriptures as signs Augustine thus expanded the realities which can be signified to include a whole new dimension, that of the spiritual and intelligible, and he was confident that he knew how those signs should be read. The carnal interpretation which the Manichees practise is that which takes the obvious understanding, the superficial meaning offered to the senses, to be the only true one. It is an understanding suitable to material realities, but totally unsuitable to and destructive of the meaning of the

³) *Mag.* 1. 2.

⁴) *Mag.* 1. 2; 12. 40.

⁵) *De Vera Rel.* 17. 33. ... si essent in scripturis et in sacramentis ... signacula veritatis.

⁶) See F. DECRET, *L'Afrique manichéenne*, 41-50.

spiritual realities hidden in the scriptures. Instead, Augustine writes in one of the *Eighty-three Disputed Questions* (391), "Carnal perception must pass by degrees through the mysteries [in this case the appearance of the Word as man and of the Holy Spirit as a dove] from those things seen by the physical eyes to those understood by the mind"⁷). To use the spiritual or allegorical interpretation necessary to see through the sign to the intelligible reality is to realize that sign here has a double, or two-layered function: the signification by the words of the realities they describe, and by these first-order realities of the spiritual meaning underlying them.

This new range of realities signified necessarily encompasses the events, as well as the objects, recorded in the scriptures. In a series of questions about methods of interpretation found towards the end of *On True Religion* (also 391) Augustine includes, "What is the difference between allegorizing history and allegorizing facts or speeches or sacraments?"⁸) The answer, in his mind is, clearly, none. The allegorical or spiritual manner of exegesis, first learned from Ambrose, is to be applied across the board. Thus we find in the writings of 391-392 frequent assertions that material objects and temporal events can be — and in scripture are — signs of spiritual realities, and that these realities can be apprehended only if these signs are not taken literally. In *On the Usefulness of Believing* Augustine argues that Jesus and Paul read the Jewish scriptures allegorically, giving as examples Jesus' reference to the sign of Jonah, Paul's to the Exodus and to Abraham's two sons. Augustine goes on:

It happens in this way for those who studiously and reverently ... seek the sense of those scriptures. To them is carefully demonstrated both the order of things and the reason for deeds and words ... The secret truths conveyed in figures are such that, when all is drawn out by interpretation, they compel those who wish to condemn before they learn to confess themselves confounded⁹).

⁷) *De Div. Quaest.* 83, q. 43. 1. Ab his [carnalibus] quae oculis corporeis cernuntur ad ea quae mente intelleguntur sacramentorum gradibus transferendos. I am following the dating given by G. BARDY, *Saint Augustin: l'homme et l'œuvre* (Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1952) and adopted by D. MOSHER, *Eighty-three Different Questions* (Washington; CUA, 1977).

⁸) *De Vera Rel.* 50. 99. Quid intersit inter allegoriam historiae et allegoriam facti et allegoriam sermonis et allegoriam sacramenti.

⁹) *De Util. Cred.* 3. 9. Hoc modo agitur cum iis, qui studiose ac pie ... scripturam illarum sensum requirunt, demonstraturque sedulo et ordo rerum, et causae factorum atque dictorum ... et figurarum tanta secreta, ut omnia quae interpretando eruuntur, miseros esse cogant fateri, qui haec volunt ante condemnare, quam discere.

These are secret' truths. Not only are the meanings of the scriptural signs veiled, but this is done deliberately as an invitation to seek the God, who "is not offered to the bodily senses and who transcends even the mind"¹⁰).

What if those things in the scriptures which seem to offend some unskilled persons were put there on purpose, so that when we read anything abhorrent to the feelings of ordinary persons, not to mention the prudent and saintly, we should be more earnestly look for a hidden meaning¹¹)?

Augustine applies this hermeneutic of benign suspicion to the mysteries of the Christian dispensation as well as the Jewish. Christ, who is prefigured in the mysteries of the Jewish scriptures and whose footsteps are to be seen in the Christian scriptures, himself remains hidden in their obscurity¹²).

Although in the early 390s Augustine is more interested in the mysteries found in the scriptures than in the ecclesial sacraments, there are references to the eucharist as sign or sacrament in the writings of those years: "the figure of [Christ's] body and blood" and "the sacrament of his body and blood"¹³). And in *Against Adimantus* (394) the eucharistic bread is said to have the value of a sign¹⁴). By 395, however, the eucharist is increasingly presented not so much as a sign of Christ's body in itself as of his passion and death. One of the most compressed and explicit passages comes from another of the *Eight-three Disputed Questions*:

He is our priest in the order of Melchizedek, who offered himself as a holocaust for our sins, and recommended that the likeness of his sacrifice be celebrated as a memorial of his passion, so that what Melchizedek offered to God we now see offered in the church of Christ throughout the whole world¹⁵).

¹⁰) *De Vera Rel.* 36. 67. Deus enim non corporalibus sensibus subiacet, sed ipsi menti supereminet.

¹¹) *De Util. Cred.* 7. 17. Quid, si illa quae nonnullos imperitos in eisdem scripturis videntur offendere, eo sunt ita posita, ut cum res abhorrentes a sensu qualicumque hominum, nedum prudentium atque sanctorum, legerentur, secretam significationem multo studiosius quaereremus.

¹²) *En. ps.*, 17. 12 and 37.

¹³) *En. ps.* 3. 1: ... convivium in quo corporis et sanguinis sui figuram...; *En. ps.* 21. 26: sacramenta corporis et sanguinis mei reddam coram timentibus eum.

¹⁴) *Cont. Admin.* 12. 3.

¹⁵) *De Div. Qu.* 83 61. 2. Ita Dominus Noster Jesus Christus rex noster ostenditur. Ipse est etiam sacerdos noster in aeternum secundum ordinem Melchisedech, qui se ipsum obtulit holocaustum pro peccatis nostris, et eius sacrificii similitudinem celebrandam in

Thus, perhaps unwittingly, the groundwork for the discussion of 'sign' in *On Christian Teaching* is being laid, and some of its points adumbrated. In that treatise of 396 both the two-layered signification and the divine intentionality in the mysteries contained in scripture are made explicit. Augustine states that "[Signs] exist only for the purpose of bringing forth and transferring to the mind of another the action of the mind in the person who makes the sign"¹⁶). Such intentionality is ascribed to Christ, and its application is sometimes eucharistic: "He signified by the sacrament of his body and blood, through taste, what he wished"¹⁷). The meaning of "through taste" is explained in a contemporary sermon where we read that the taste of the eucharist is "sweet" with the sweetness of the passion, because it is salvific¹⁸). In keeping with the paedagogical thrust he sees in the scriptures, Augustine continues to insist on the dangers of the literal interpretation of signs, and again his examples are sometimes eucharistic: "He who follows the letter, ... if he hears of a sacrifice, his thoughts do not go beyond the customary victims of the flock and fruits of the earth"¹⁹).

2. "The sacrifice of Christ *is commemorated* in the sacrament".

While the sign of the eucharist, the bread and wine, is the way into the knowledge of the reality it represents, that intellectual and spiritual journey depends on memory and, in this context, on its indispensable ally, faith. Memory is necessary in three ways to the Christian eucharist. First, for the part it plays here, as in any signification, of retaining both the impressions made on the senses and the meaning of words, combining these appropriately when called upon. This bringing together of sense impressions and verbal meanings is a basic function in present knowledge²⁰).

Because the function of signs depends so much on memory, it is

suae passionis memoriam commendavit, ut illud quod Melchisedech obtulit Deo iam per orbem terrarum in Christi ecclesia videamus offerri.

¹⁶) *De Doct. Christ.* II. 2. 3. Nec ulla causa est nobis significandi ... nisi ad depromendum et traiciendum in alterius animum id, quod animo gerit, qui signum dat.

¹⁷) *Ibid.* II. 3. 4. Signum aliquod dedit et sacramento corporis et sanguinis sui per gustatum significavit, quod voluit.

¹⁸) *En. ps.* 117. 6.

¹⁹) *De Doct. Christ.* III. 5. 9. Qui enim sequitur litteram ... Cum audierit 'sacrificium', non excedit cogitatione illud, quod fieri de victimis pecorum terrenisque fructibus solet.

²⁰) See note 3.

not surprising to find that the development of the notion of sign is paralleled, in Augustine's writings, by the expansion of the role of memory. Thus in 389, in *The Teacher*, when signs are chiefly of sensible things, the work of the memory is to call to mind those objects signified. In *Letter 7*, to Nebridius, also written in 389, Augustine explains that memory depends on mental images, and the retention of images which evoke intellectual knowledge is explicitly mentioned²¹). Similarly, in 391, when some signs are recognized as the expression of hidden intelligible truths, Augustine presents memory as capable of receiving spiritual realities: "Memory does not draw out only carnal sensations of the soul, but spiritual movements as well"²²).

Thirdly, memory is seen as the repository of prophetic history. Augustine had little use in general for the collective memory we call historical (except insofar as accounts of the acts of God in the past could strengthen Christian hope for the future)²³). This low valuation arose partly from the consequences of temporal mutability: The subject matter of history is by definition past and therefore non-existent. A second argument against historical knowledge, in Augustine's eyes, is that it must depend on hearsay and so cannot be intellectual knowledge in the proper sense.

Let us therefore distinguish between the faith we owe to history and that which we owe to the intelligence, between what we commit to memory, not knowing it to be true, but believing it nevertheless, and where the truth is which does not come and go, but always remains the same²⁴).

But the particular hearsay, or second-hand knowledge, which is based on divine authority has quite a different standing.

Whatever is related to us of any of these temporal events, whether past or future, must be believed on divine authority ... As they tell us of our liberation, which God accomplishes through the perfectly

²¹) *Ep.* 7. 4. ... quorum est unum sensis rebus impressum, alterum putatis, tertium ratis.

²²) *De Musica* VI. 12. 34. Excipit autem memoria non solum carnales motus animi ... sed etiam spiritales.

²³) *De Lib. Arb.* III. 21. 60.

²⁴) *De Vera Rel.* 50. 99. Distinguiamus ergo, quam fidem debeamus historiae, quam fidem debeamus intelligentiae, quid mandemus memoriae verum esse nescientes, sed credentes tamen, et ubi sit verum, quod non venit et transit, sed semper eodem modo manet.

ordered succession of time, they must be believed without hesitation²⁵).

The acceptance by the Christian community of the memories recounted in the scriptures as relating true past events is, therefore, not credulousness, but faith.

All three functions of memory are present in the eucharistic celebration. Not only must the double sign (words and bread and wine) be recognized, and the spiritual reality which they represent be accepted, but this recognition is based on faith in the church's interpretation of the scriptures. By 395, when the eucharist is so insistently being presented as the sign of Christ's death, it is this death which is called to mind as the spiritual reality signified and commemorated following Christ's instruction: "[Christ], offered himself for our sins ... and recommended that the likeness of his sacrifice be celebrated in the Church in memory of his passion"²⁶). By the next year that memory has become participation. The dominical injunction, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood possesses eternal life", is a figure telling us to participate in the passion of the Lord and to guard in our innermost being the sweet and salvific memory of his flesh crucified and wounded for us²⁷).

The necessity of the faith that both depends on and informs memory is constantly stressed in the late 390s. Taking the phrase from the road to Emmaus scene in Luke's gospel, "[Christ] appeared to be going further" (24. 28), Augustine poses the question whether Christ was acting deceitfully and responds that this is a case of a fiction that is not deceitful, but a figure designed to teach. Christ, unrecognized and thought by the two disciples to be truly absent because bodily absent, showed the intention of continuing his journey, but was prevailed upon to remain, he was held back. Their action is a model, Augustine explains, for that of the Christian at the eucharistic celebration.

Hold him by faith, hold him at the breaking of the bread. What shall I say? Have you acknowledged him? If you have, you have

²⁵) *De Lib. Art.* III. 21. 60. Quaecumque ergo nobis de quibuscumque creaturis vel praeterita vel futura divina auctoritate credenda narrantur ... Dum nobis commendant per ordinatissimam temporum seriem quam non neglegat liberationem nostram Deus, sine ulla dubitatione credenda sunt.

²⁶) *De Div. Quaest.* 83 61. 2. See note 16, and also *Serm. Guelf* 5.

²⁷) *De Doct. Christ.* III. 16. 24. Figura ergo est, praecipiens passioni domini esse communicandum et suaviter atque utiliter recondendum in memoria, quod pro nobis caro eius crucifixa et vulnerata sit.

found Christ there ... Christ goes away from those who put off recognizing this mystery. Let them therefore hold it fast, and not let it go²⁸).

Augustine's general understanding of the present truth of the past is set forth in *Against Faustus*:

Whatever is past does not now exist Consequently that which we truly say to be past has no [present] existence, but for that reason [that our statement is true] it is true that it did exist in the past. For the truth [of its past existence] is in our judgement, not in that which no longer exists The truth in this case is found first in our judgement, when we know something to be true and say so. But if that truth were wiped from our mind (if we were to forget what we know) it would remain true [that it had happened]²⁹).

The eucharist is a particular application of this theory that the truth of the past can have its locus only in something existing in the present — human acceptance of that past as true. The Christian's faith in the salvific death of Jesus, in his words, "This is my body, this is my blood", and in his command, "Do this in memory of me", is necessary for true judgement of the past and therefore for present participation in the eucharist. It is not my intention in this essay to enter the centuries-old discussion of Augustine's understanding of the eucharistic presence in any objective sense of that word, 'presence'. I wish, rather, to emphasize, the necessary role of faith based on the believer's acceptance of ecclesial memory. It is only by such memory that the passion of Christ can, to Augustine's mind, be brought into the present. "Christians celebrate the memory of that same completed sacrifice in the most holy oblation of and participation in the body and blood of Christ"³⁰).

3. "The sacrifice of Christ is commemorated in the sacrament".

The third necessary ingredient to Augustine's eucharistic theology at the end of the 390s was the understanding of Christ's death as a

²⁸) *Serm.* 89. 7. Quantum igitur ad praesentiam corporalem absens putabatur Dominus Christus; absens putabatur, velut longius ibit. Tene fideliter, tene illum ad fractionem panis. Quid dicam? Agnovistis? Si agnovistis, ibi Christum invenistis ... Qui hoc sacramentum nosse differunt, longius ab eis Christus. Id tenant, non dimittant.

²⁹) *Cont. Faust.* XXVI. 4, 5. Quicquid enim praeteritum est, iam non est... Non ergo est, quod vere dicimus fuisse, sed ideo verum est illud fuisse, quia in nostra sententia verum est, non in ea re, quae iam non est. ... Ubi sit haec vera sententia, prius invenitur in animo nostro, cum id verum scimus et dicimus. Sed si et de animo nostro ablata fuerit, cum id, quod scimus, obliiti fuerimus, manebit ipsa veritate.

³⁰) *Cont. Faust.* XX. 18. Unde iam Christiani, peracti eiusdem sacrificii memoriam celebrant, sacrosancta oblatione et participatione corporis et sanguinis Christi.

sacrifice. No more than the understanding of sacrament as a sign which conveys a spiritual reality, or of memory which, informed by faith, enables the Christian to participate in that spiritual reality and its effects, had this interpretation of Christ's death been Augustine's from his baptism onwards³¹).

As countless passages from the writings of 388 to 392 make clear, the saving work of Jesus was first seen by Augustine as paedagogical and exemplary. This emphasis was particular suitable in countering the determinism of Manichaeism by insisting on the possibility of the Christian turning away from sin and towards God. The presentation of Jesus as teacher and example understandably stressed his life rather than his death. When the cross was introduced into Augustine's theology in 391 it too was in the context of example, a model of courage and endurance³²).

The year 391 marks a change in Augustine's understanding of the human condition of sin and mortality. Death, and perhaps even more the fear of death, rivet the attention of human persons on their physical welfare, distracting them from seeking God, and building the 'carnal habititude' which makes resisting temptation almost impossible. In a complementary way, the death of Christ is presented in 391 in *On Eighty-three Different Questions* as an effective counter to the causes of this habit of sin, because it is interiorly liberating. "Death should not be feared. This fact ... is demonstrated by the death of that man whom the Wisdom of God assumed"³³).

As Augustine became more and more convinced of the radical nature of human evil he saw the human mind and soul less and less as the locus of its possible defeat. Appeals to free will and the example of Jesus, no matter how powerful that example and how well and interiorly appropriated, were not enough. By 394, in *Against Adimantus*, Jesus' death is presented not only as effective against the fear of death, but also as destructive of the sinful desires inherited from Adam, which have become part of human nature. The 'old man' is overcome through faith in the cross³⁴). The dependence of the efficacy of the cross on the faith of the believer is given greater prominence after

³¹) I have discussed the changing character of Augustine's understanding of the cross more fully in "Augustine's developing use of the cross: 387-400", *Augustinian Studies* 15 (1984), 15-33.

³²) See, for example, *De Vera Relig.* 3. 3; *De Musica* VI. 4. 7.

³³) *De Div. Quaest.* 83. 25. Mors autem metuenda non est. Oportuit ergo idipsum illius hominis quem Dei Sapientia suscepit, morte monstrari. See also *De Util. Cred.* 15. 33. Qui ... illa pateretur quibus a sequendo Deo deterrebamus.

³⁴) *Cont. Admin.* 21.

394, but a more 'objective' understanding emerges as well. Christ is more often referred to as 'the Redeemer', he who himself owes nothing to the devil, but who by his suffering buys back the souls sold to the devil for pleasure, who by his innocent death frees human persons from guilty death³⁵).

When, in 396, Augustine became convinced of the total bondage of the will, it was allied with another conviction — that of generic human guilt. Generic guilt cannot be dealt with on the level of the individual human person, its undoing lies in the hands of God alone. God's forgiveness comes in the situation established by the cross (the state of justification), Christ "as priest, implored indulgence for us by the sacrifice of his body"³⁶). It is in *Against Faustus* that Augustine's understanding of Jesus' death as sacrifice comes to its first full expression. He brings together there several of his anti-Manichean arguments and shows a new confidence in refuting the Manichean teaching of Jesus 'patibilis'. While the Manichees see multiple suffering Jesus, for catholic Christians there is "one most true sacrifice ... offered for the sins of all believers"³⁷).

Not only did the three themes of sign/sacrament, memory/faith and Jesus' sacrificial death develop alongside each other in the 390s but there is — not surprisingly — congruence among them. The expansion of the notion of sign/sacrament brings with it the expansion of the function of the memory. But neither, however widely stretched, would have been sufficient to Augustine's understanding of the eucharist ca 400 without his (relatively recent) understanding of Jesus' death as sacrifice. By the year 400 these strands had been woven together.

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³⁵) *Exp. Prop. Rom.* 42. 1-2.

³⁶) *Cont. Faust.* XIX. 7. Ille per carnis suae sacrificium sacerdos effectus, impetrat nobis indulgentiam.

³⁷) *Cont. Faust.* XX. 17. ... unius verissimi sacrificii quod pro peccatis omnium credentium offerri oportet.