

AUGUSTINE, SERMON 80,7:

"Quando dormitat oratio?"

Jerome's *Libellus de virginitate servanda* (Epist. 22) affirms that *sanctis etiam ipse somnus oratio sit* (37,1). In a discussion of this passage evidence has recently been adduced to show that the idea in question was something of a commonplace². In the same connection it was suggested *en passant* that Augustine may also have had the concept of "sleep as prayer" in mind when he asks: *quando dormitat oratio?* (serm. 80,7). This suggestion has now been rejected by Petitmengin³: "Augustin n'y fait pas allusion en *serm.* 80,7; il y vise ceux qui s'endorment en priant (cf. *serm.* 362,29: *in ipsis vocibus dormitabit*)". The purpose of the present article is to argue that in neither of these two passages from his sermons is Augustine talking about those who fall asleep while praying; in the first of them the reference would accordingly appear to be to "sleep as prayer" after all.

It will be appropriate to begin with the text adduced by Petitmengin as a putative parallel to the question Augustine asks at *serm.* 80,7; attention can then be devoted to the elucidation of this question itself. When in *serm.* 362,29 Augustine declares that *in ipsis vocibus dormitabit*, Petitmengin supposes a reference to falling asleep at prayer. *Dormitare* can certainly denote "sleep"⁴. However it is equally possible for this verb to have the meaning "to allow one's energy or attention to flag"⁵. In the passage of *serm.* 362 adduced by Petitmengin it can be shown that *dormitare* does indeed bear this second sense.

¹ Works are cited according to *Thesaurus linguae latinae: Index librorum scriptorum inscriptionum*², Leipzig, 1990; the editions used are those in H. J. FREDE, *Kirchenschriftsteller: Verzeichnis und Sigel* [=Kirch.] (*Vetus Latina*, 1/1), Freiburg, 1981, and its *Aktualisierungshefte* (1984 and 1988).

² Cf. the present writer, *Tertullian in Jerome* (Epist. 22,37,1f.) [=Tert.], in *Symbolae Osloenses* 68 (1993), 129-143 (131f.).

³ P. PETITMENGIN, rev. of ADKIN, *Tert.*, in *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 40 (1994), 494f. His reference to "DS, 10, c. 1037-38" (495) should read instead "DS, 14, c. 1037-38".

⁴ Cf. *TLL* V, 2034,83f. (1: "fere i. q. dormire"); *OLD* 573 (a: "to feel sleepy, drowse").

⁵ So *OLD* 573 (s. v.: b); cf. *TLL* V, 2035,47f. (2a: "ignavum, otiosum, hebetem esse, cessare") and 2035,83 (2b: "incuriosum, neglegentem esse").

There Augustine is describing the after-life. The point is made explicitly that in this resurrectional state there is no such thing as sleep:

"ibi ergo non erit (sc. *somnus*). ubi enim non est mors, nec imago mortis erit".

On the contrary the listener is assured that *semper vigilabit*; his sole occupation will be to utter "Amen" and "Alleluia". Augustine then anticipates a possible misgiving on the part of his audience:

"sed nolite iterum carnali cogitatione contristari, quia si forte aliquis vestrum steterit et dixerit quotidie, Amen et Alleluia, taedio marcescet, et in ipsis vocibus dormitabit, et tacere iam volet".

Here the meaning of *dormitare* is determined by the context. On the one hand "sleep" has been expressly excluded from the after-life. On the other the two formulations which immediately surround the verb provide further evidence for the alternative sense "to allow one's attention to flag". The phrase *taedio marcescet* precedes: while *taedium* denotes "ennui", *marcescere* signifies "to become apathetic"⁶. *Dormitare* is then followed by *et tacere iam volet*. *Tacere* shows that the person in question is still talking, while *volet* indicates an act of volition: both rule out the meaning "sleep" for the antecedent *dormitare*. Here the verb must accordingly refer to inattentiveness, not to those who "s'endorment".

It is true that earlier in the same long paragraph Augustine had employed *dormitare* with the sense of "sleep":

"illud scio, fratres, quod non sumus dormitaturi vacando, quia et ipse somnus subsidium defectionis datus est animae".

There however the reference was specifically to sleep as a characteristic of earthly life; the point was made above that Augustine then proceeds to eliminate it categorically from heaven⁷. Such use of the same term with a different meaning is unexceptionable, since an exact parallel is provided by the same paragraph of this sermon: while in the sentence *non sonis transeuntibus dicemus Amen et Alleluia*, *sed affectu animi* the noun *affectus* denotes "sincerity"⁸, it is employed shortly afterwards with the neutral sense of "frame of mind" or "attitude" in the phrase *longe alio et ineffabi-*

⁶ Cf. OLD ss. vv.

⁷ H. LACKENBACHER in TLL V, 2035,28-31 rightly assigns this first instance of *dormitare* to the sense "fere i. q. dormire"; however he is wrong to link it with the second one. Lackenbacher is also mistaken (ib. 2035,8f.) in giving the same meaning to Cyprian, *epist.* 11,5,1: *quod dormitemus in precibus*. While the adjacent *vigilanter* shows that Cyprian is also playing on the literal sense of the verb, the whole letter is a castigation of ecclesiastical indiscipline: accordingly *dormitare* signifies "inattentiveness" here as well.

⁸ Cf. A. BLAISE, *Dictionnaire latin-français des auteurs chrétiens* [=Dict.], Strasbourg, 1954, 49 (s. v. 4); OLD 77 (s. v. 6f.).

*liter alio affectu*⁹. The number of lines separating these two occurrences of *affectus* is far smaller than that between the two instances of *dormitare*.

Finally two roughly contemporaneous texts may be adduced to illustrate Augustine's use of *dormitare* in the clause *in ipsis vocibus dormitabit*: both concern prayer. The first comes from Marius Victorinus' commentary on Ephesians:

"potest tamen ad intentionem mentis hoc accipi "vigilantes semper" ut in omni oratione non veluti dormientes, quod patiuntur illi qui ea, quae nota sunt, recitant vel legunt vel memoria pronuntiant; quid dicant et quemadmodum dicant paene non sentiunt (6,18)".

The second occurs in Jerome's *Vita Hilarionis*:

"orabat semel fixo in terram capite et, ut natura fert hominum, abducta ab oratione mens nescio quid aliud cogitabat; insiliit dorso eius festinus agitator, et latera calcibus, cervicem flagello verberans: 'eia', inquit, 'cur dormitas?' (3,12)".

This text is particularly significant, for on the one hand the term *dormitare* itself is employed, while on the other Hilarion is explicitly described as *not* being asleep: *abducta ab oratione mens nescio quid aliud cogitabat*.

If then Petitmengin is wrong to affirm that the passage he cites from *serm.* 362,29 deals with falling asleep at prayer, there is no presumptive evidence for his contention that the same reference is to be found in *serm.* 80,7, for which the other text was adduced as an alleged parallel. Careful examination of the context in which Augustine has embedded his question *quando dormitat oratio?* in fact demonstrates that here too Petitmengin is mistaken to postulate an allusion to those who fall asleep while praying. The full text of this passage of *serm.* 80,7 runs as follows:

"haec beneficia toto ardore desideremus, omni perseverantia petamus, non sermone longo, sed teste gemitu. desiderium semper orat, etsi lingua taceat. si semper desideras, semper oras. quando dormitat oratio? quando frigerit desiderium".

The *beneficia* to which Augustine refers (l. 1) are *aeterna* in contradistinction to *temporalia*: such a sublime theme might alone be thought to preclude mention of anything as humble as nodding off. The next sentence introduces the idea of incessant prayer (*semper orat*; l. 2); it is said to continue *etsi lingua taceat*. Since the prayers of those who fall asleep do stop at the same time as their tongues, this statement is a further indication that such people are not in Augustine's mind. With these words he is in fact reverting to a subject broached at the start of the sermon, where Luke 18,1 had been quoted: *oportet semper orare* (80,2). There the verse

⁹ Cf. BLAISE, *Dict.*, 49 (s. v. 2); OLD 77 (s. v. 1a).

had been linked to Matthew 6,7 (*nolite multum loqui*), which is also echoed in the passage currently in question (*non sermone longo*; ll. 1f.). The biblical injunction to "pray unceasingly" is regularly associated with the idea of sleep as prayer; this is the case in the text of Jerome's *Libellus de virginitate servanda* with which the present article began. An allusion to the same idea would accordingly be no surprise in *serm.* 80,7.

The theme of unceasing prayer continues in the final section of the passage quoted above (ll. 2-4); it is here that Augustine asks *quando dormitat oratio*? The four clauses at issue are in fact closely interrelated by a carefully chiasmic arrangement: *desideras ... oras ... oratio ... desiderium*¹⁰. Since *quando dormitat oratio*? is immediately preceded by mention of continuous prayer (*semper oras*), the audience will inevitably have understood this question as having the same reference: here Augustine is not speaking of those who fall asleep while praying, but of prayer which continues during sleep. Confirmation is supplied by the very next clause, which affirms that such prayer only ceases with the discontinuance of desire: *quando frigerit desiderium*.

Further corroboration comes from two other passages of Augustine's *oeuvre*. *Epist.* 130,18, which was written shortly after *serm.* 80¹¹, again links continuous prayer with continuous desire: *semper...desideremus et semper oremus*. This time explicit reference is made to I Thessalonians 5,17 (*sine intermissione orate*), which had similarly been adduced in Jerome's *Libellus*. Augustine also reproduces his sermon's application of *frigescere* to *desiderium*¹². The second passage is in *psalm.* 37,14; since the treatment here is far more substantial, the text may be cited *in extenso*:

"ipsum enim desiderium tuum oratio tua est; et si continuum desiderium, continua oratio. non enim frustra dixit apostolus: 'sine intermissione orantes' (I Thess. 5,17). numquid sine intermissione genu flectimus, corpus prosternimus, aut manus levamus, ut dicat: 'sine intermissione orate'? aut si sic dicimus nos
5 orare, hoc puto sine intermissione non possumus facere. est alia interior sine intermissione oratio, quae est desiderium. quidquid aliud agas, si desideras illud sabbatum, non intermittis orare. si non vis intermittere orare, noli inter-

¹⁰ Each of these four words occupies the final position in its respective clause: two nouns balance two verbs, which are also marked by homoeoteleuton. The parallelism is further enhanced by the twofold anaphora of the temporal adverbs (*semper ... semper ... quando ... quando ...*). The whole of this section accordingly evinces an exactly symmetrical structure: both clauses of its first half follow adverb with verb, while in those of the second the sequence is each time adverb, verb, noun.

¹¹ A date "intra annum 411 et 413" is assigned to *epist.* 130 by A. GOLDBACHER, *S. Aureli Augustini...epistulae V* (CSEL, 58), Vienna-Leipzig, 1923, 36. *Serm.* 80 belongs "um 410" (FREDE, *Kirch.*, 137).

¹² In addition the letter follows *serm.* 80,7 in mentioning both *multiloquium* and *gemitus* (130,19f.; cf. l. 2 above).

mittere desiderare. continuum desiderium tuum continua vox tua est. tacebis, si amare destiteris. qui tacuerunt? de quibus dictum est: 'quoniam abundavit iniquitas, refrigescet caritas multorum' (Mt. 24,12)¹³.

From the detailed argumentation of the foregoing it is clear that Petitmengin is wrong to maintain that in the briefer treatment of the same topic at *serm.* 80,7 Augustine is concerned with the sort of prayer to which falling asleep can put a stop. In both instances we are dealing instead with *alia interior sine intermissione oratio, quae est desiderium* (ll. 5f.); such prayer is only silenced *si amare destiteris* (ll. 8f.). The wording employed here to define those who do stop (*refrigescet caritas multorum*; l. 10) also makes clear that *quando frigerit desiderium* in *serm.* 80,7 (ll. 3f.) is in fact an echo of Matthew 24,12¹⁴.

The date of this *Enarratio* on Psalm 37 is contested. Zarb placed it in 395¹⁵. However Rondet then proposed a date after 415¹⁶. He acknowledges that "il n'est pas facile de dater ce sermon" (ib.). The evidence adduced above would nonetheless seem to provide a clue. This *Enarratio* deals at great length with material which is presented in summary form at

¹³ *Gemitus* is also present here, since the verse on which Augustine is commenting (Ps. 37,10) runs: *gemitus meus non est absconditus a te*. No light is shed on the point at issue in the present article by the treatment of this passage in M. VINCENT, *La prière selon saint Augustin d'après les 'Enarrationes in Psalmos'*, in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 110 (1988), 371-402 (391).

¹⁴ At in *psalm.* 118, *serm.* 10,4 (for the date "nach 422" cf. FREDE, *Kirch.*, 132) Augustine links *refrigescere* to *dormitare*; here he is commenting on Ps. 118,28 (*dormitavit anima mea prae taedio*). This verse had been combined with direct quotation of Mt. 24,12 at *un. eccl.* 15,38 (for the date of 405 cf. FREDE, *Kirch.*, 159). A *propos* this treatise Frede (ib.) observes: "in der Umgebung von AU(gustinus) oder von AU selber verfasst". This combination of texts would seem to be an argument in favour of Augustinian authorship. At *serm.* 80,7 Augustine employs *frigescere* instead of *refrigescere*. Use of this shorter form in Mt. 24,12 is attested only at Hilary, in *Matth.* 25,2 according to P. SABATIER, *Biblorum sacrorum latinae versiones antiquae* III, Rheims, 1743, 145. However Augustine can be shown to employ it with some frequency; cf. *epist.* 140,55; *epist. Divj.* 13,3,5; ib. 18,3,3; in *evang. Ioh.* 48,3; ib. 57,5; ib. 94,2; in *Iob* p. 595,19; ib. p. 610,7; in *psalm.* 118, *serm.* 19,4; in *psalm.* 147,23; *serm.* 350A,3 coll. Morin p. 294,23. Finally it may be noted that a striking parallel to Augustine's formulation at *serm.* 80,7 is found later in Fulgentius of Ruspe, *serm.* 3,4 F.: *nec cum videt correptionem aliqua verborum austeritate fervere, existimet caritatem in corde frigescere. sic enim vigilet in ore correptio ut in corde non dormitet oratio*. Fulgentius was deeply influenced by Augustine; cf. O. BAR-DENHEWER, *Geschichte der altkirchlichen Literatur* V, Freiburg/B., 1932, 306. Perhaps there is a specific debt here.

¹⁵ S. M. ZARB, *Chronologia Enarrationum S. Augustini in Psalmos*, Valetta, 1948, 253 (cf. 257 for references to Zarb's discussion, which is scattered throughout his monograph).

¹⁶ H. RONDET, *Essais sur la chronologie des "Enarrationes in Psalmos" de saint Augustin*, in *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique* 65 (1964), 110-136 (126).

serm. 80,7. Since the latter was composed around 410, Augustine's *Enarratio* on Psalm 37 would appear to have been produced before that date.

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