

MEMORY, TRUTH, AND REPRESENTATION AT AUGUSTINE'S CONVERSION SCENE//A REVIEW

The story of Augustine's conversion to Catholic Christianity recounted in the *Confessions* has long been the subject of controversy. Much of that controversy has centered on the conversion scene described so powerfully at the end of Book 8. The century-old debate initiated by Harnack and Boissier, extended by Alfarić and Boyer, given new life by the researches of Courcelle and Bolgiani has recently been revived by Leo C. Ferrari in a series of articles beginning in 1980 with his "Paul at the Conversion of St. Augustine."¹ Although inspired by Courcelle's work, Ferrari does Courcelle better by suggesting that Courcelle too largely assumes the general verisimilitude of Augustine's description of that final conversion scene at the end of Book 8. For his part, Ferrari would like to break "the spell of the justly famous conversion scene."² Ferrari's argument is that Augustine's description of the final conversion scene in the Milanese garden is a fabrication so artfully executed that it continues to be regarded as a truthful account of what actually took place.

What I propose here is an assessment of Ferrari's attempt to disenchant Augustine's readers. In all I will be reviewing six articles published between 1980 and 1992.³ I will begin with Ferrari's master

¹ Adolf von HARNACK, *Monasticism: Its Ideals and History and the Confessions of St. Augustine*, translated by E. E. Kellet and F. H. Marseille (London: Williams and Norgate, 1901), 119-171; Gaston BOISSIER, *La fin du Paganisme: Étude sur les dernières luttes religieuses en occident au quatrième siècle* (Paris: Librairie Hachette, 1922), I. 291-325; Prosper ALFARIC, *L'Évolution intellectuelle de saint Augustin. I. Du manichéisme au néoplatonisme* (Paris: Emile Nourry, 1918); Charles BOYER, *Christianisme et Néo-platonisme dans la formation de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1920); Pierre COURCELLE, *Recherches sur les Confessions de Saint Augustin* (Paris: 1950; second edition, enlarged 1968); Franco BOLGIANI, *La Conversione di S. Agostino e l'VIII libro delle Confessioni* (Turin: Univ. di Torino, Fac. Lett. 8.4, 1956); Leo C. FERRARI, "Paul at the Conversion of St. Augustine (Conf. VIII, 12, 29-30)", *Augustinian Studies* 11 (1980): 5-20.

² Leo C. FERRARI, "Saint Augustine's Conversion Scene: The End of a Modern Debate?" *Studia Patristica* 22 (1989), 246.

³ Leo C. FERRARI, "Paul at the Conversion of St. Augustine (Conf. VIII, 12, 29-30)", *Augustinian Studies* 11 (1980): 5-20; "Saint Augustine on the Road to Damascus", *Augustinian Studies* 13 (1982): 151-170; "An Analysis of Augustine's Conversional Reading (Conf. 8.12,29)", *Augustinian Studies* 18 (1987); "Saint Augustine's Conversion Scene: The End of a Modern Debate?" *Studia Patristica* 22 (1989), 246; "Truth and Augustine's Conversion Scene", *Collectanea Augustiniana* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 9-19; "Beyond Augustine's Conversion Scene", in *Augustine: From Rhetor to Theologian*, ed. Joanne McWilliam (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), 97-107.

theme paper at the 1987 Oxford Patristic Conference in which he summarized most of the articles he had published up until then and reiterated his claim that he had proved Augustine's account of his conversion as a fabrication.

I. "Saint Augustine's Conversion Scene: The End of a Modern Debate?"

In his master theme paper at the 1987 Oxford Conference for Patristic Studies,⁴ Ferrari sets forth his own approach to Augustine's conversion scene as indisputable. Ferrari's argument rests on this simple fact: Romans 13.13-14, the Pauline text which Augustine claims as central to his conversion, rarely appears in any of the works that Augustine wrote prior to the *Confessions* and after. Ferrari rightly wonders why such silence on a text which changed Augustine's life so dramatically.

For Ferrari, the absence of Romans 13.13-14 in Augustine's early works can only mean one thing: the two verses were not instrumental in the conversion in Milan as Augustine's came to describe it, and that the latter narrative in the *Confessions* merely attests to Augustine's interests in Paul's conversion in the late 390s when Augustine was writing his own conversion narrative. This must be the case, Ferrari argues, because Augustine betrays no such silence in the early works and in the *Confessions* about the impact his reading of Cicero's *Hortensius* had upon him when he was eighteen. And for this reason "there is no need to impute to the young Augustine of 386 the transformed personality of that powerful scene" (p. 246).

Ferrari proposes that the "real" conversion which set Augustine towards writing the narrative found in the *Confessions* came much later, and derives "from a momentous event just prior to writing the *Confessions*, which event caused this writing, together with its dramatic embellishments, including the conversion scene" (p. 246). This, he claims, solves the problem of the two Augustine's: the Augustine of the Cassiciacum dialogues and the Augustine of the *Confessions*. And "also has the advantage of showing an evolutionary conversion more in accord with the sequence of events in the *Vita* of Augustine's biographer, Possidius" (p. 246). But how much Possidius' narrative tells us about Augustine's life prior to his conversion in Milan is open to question.

⁴ Leo C. FERRARI, "Saint Augustine's Conversion Scene: The End of a Modern Debate?" *Studia Patristica* 22 (1989), 246.

When Ferrari assesses Augustine's earlier conversion narratives he uses Augustine's words in a manner that leaves so much in doubt. Ferrari claims, for instance, that his view "makes good sense out of an otherwise inconsistent statement repeatedly made by Augustine and ignored, to their peril, by the historicists. This is the insistent statement that the earlier works (including the dialogues) were written too much under the influence of the pride of the schools" (p. 246). In the first place, the statement does not refer to all of Augustine's early works. And secondly, Augustine's comment about writing under the residual influence of the schools does not remove the problem of the "two Augustines." After all, in *De beata vita* 1.1-5 and in *Contra Academicos* 2.2.3-6 Augustine speaks of his conversion as a conversion to *philosophia*.

II: "Paul at the Conversion of Augustine (Conf. VIII, 12, 29-30)"

The substance of Ferrari's position is spelled out in his 1980 article on "Paul at the Conversion of Augustine (Conf. VIII, 12, 29-30)." The argument follows two tracks. First, the use of Romans 13.13-14 in the writings prior to the *Confessions*, and second, the citations of Paul's works around the time of the writing of the *Confessions*, all of this intended to show how the famous *tolle lege* scene has been fabricated.

Ferrari distinguishes the two opposing camps: "The historicists maintain that the *tolle lege* scene is an historic fact; an accurate account of an event which really transpired, exactly as described" (pp. 6-7). The fictionalists "claim that the *tolle lege* scene is wholly or partly fictional in character" (p. 8). Ferrari notes that for the historicists the idea that Augustine "has added, omitted or otherwise changed any incidents in his conversion-story" (pp. 8-9) raises an ominous question "as to just where this tampering with the original facts would end. It therefore becomes unthinkable to allow fact to be contaminated in any way by fiction. Consequently every event in the story of the *Confessions* must have taken place exactly as described" (p. 9). But while the historicists claim such authenticity and insist that the *tolle lege* scene be regarded as "historical fact and therefore a faithful account of the events exactly as they transpired" (p. 9), the fictionalists have no such qualms. They "can be represented as arguing that such an interpretation loses sight of the true nature of the *Confessions*" (p. 9). The *Confessions*, Ferrari assures us, "is not a mere diary of daily events in the author's life, but rather a work of literary art whose prime *raison d'être* is the religious edification of the

reader. In such a perspective, while there can be no doubting the essential elements of the conversion-story, the author must be permitted to tell the story in his own way and in accord with the exigencies of his main purpose. Consequently, a certain romanticising of reality is inevitable" (p. 9). Augustine must be allowed a certain literary licence to invent or reinvent his past in the hope of providing edifying discourse. Needless to say, it is the fictionalists who seem the most reasonable arbiters of Augustine's narrative, with the historicists looking like conservative reactionaries desperate to save Augustine from calumny.

Ferrari speaks of "permitting" Augustine to tell the story as he would like to do it, but there is no analysis of Augustine's methods and his own claims about the truthfulness of his account, or even about the place of memory and recollection in his attempt to give an account of his past sins and misdeeds. To suggest also that Augustine be permitted a certain romanticizing of reality in order to tell his story "in accord with the exigencies of his main purpose" appears laudable, but in fact is misleading, if Ferrari overlooks Augustine's claim to be seeing in his experience the outworking of an event much like the story of Antony that he heard (*Confessions* 9.7.14). And if Augustine retells his story by fabricating scenes in order to provide edifying discourse, one would have to ask just what notion of "edifying discourse" Augustine supports.

To omit certain details in telling a story is not quite the same thing as adding or otherwise changing what actually took place. The former incurs little moral difficulties if in fact those details are deemed irrelevant or tangential. However, if they alter the scope of the narrative and make someone like Augustine look better than he was, it poses a problem. Furthermore, if Augustine fabricates his narrative by adding or embellishing his account, he places himself in a morally questionable posture. For one who lamented his career as a rhetorician, telling lies to people who knew he was telling lies and being praised for it (*Confessions* 6.6.9-10), this would be quite an achievement.

Ferrari uses the notion of "the romanticising" of Augustine's narrative to preclude a much more difficult problem: the very nature of historical experience and how we remember and represent the past. By presenting the historicists as the opponents of a literary approach to Augustine's *Confessions* he sets historical representation over against fiction as the only two ways of looking at a work like the *Confessions*, ignoring in the process a much earlier argument by O'Meara.⁵

O'Meara argues that the literary qualities of Augustine's narrative do not detract from the historical facts underlying them. And so rather than set the literary against the historical, the narrative is both historical and literary and we should see the literary as undergirding a historical reality without which there would have been no story to tell.⁶

If there is any merit at all to Ferrari's argument it rests on Romans 13.13-14 and its near absence in Augustine's works prior to the *Confessions*. And yet even this potentially fascinating problem is lost in an interpretative matrix that leads to a great deal of confusion. In any case, if Augustine had said nothing in the Cassiciacum dialogues about being converted by reading the Apostle Paul, then the silence about Romans 13.13-14 would be deafening. That he does mention Paul demands that we be cautious in dismissing the role of the Pauline passage in the conversion described years later in *Confessions* 8.12.29. The absence of any specific mention of Romans 13.13-14 in the early writings, then, should not be construed in such simple terms as Ferrari suggests, especially because, as we will see, every little detail Ferrari provides about Augustine's commentary on Paul's texts in the early writings undermines Ferrari's thesis.

Ferrari points out that in the early works "Augustine is found to be astonishingly silent on even the most provocative occasions. There are no rapturous exegesis of Romans XIII,13-14 to be found ... Indeed, as far as I have been able to ascertain, there is scarcely one reference to these verses in his works of that period. This is strange when one considers the general atmosphere of enthusiasm which permeates these writings" (p. 12). "It is even stranger, when one takes account of some of the particular works involved," Ferrari continues. He writes that while Augustine wrote *De vera religione* to Romanianus in the hope of converting him from Manichaeism Augustine does not mention Romans 13.13-14. Ferrari finds this surprising, given the similarities of their experiences and the "well-known closeness of the two friends" (p. 12). But why is this necessary? Ferrari does not indicate that in the epistolary sections of the much earlier *Contra Academicos*, sent to Romanianus from Cassiciacum (386/387), Augustine mentions the reading of Paul as the

⁵ J. J. O'MEARA, "Augustine's Confessions: Elements of Fiction", in *Augustine: From Rhetor to Theologian*, ed. Joanne McWilliam (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), 77-95.

⁶ Cf. Henry CHADWICK, "History and Symbolism in the Garden at Milan", in *From Augustine to Eriugena: Essays on Neoplatonism and Christianity in Honor of John O'Meara*, eds. F. X. Martin, O.S.A and J. A. Richmond (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 42-55.

event which liberated him from the Platonists and returned him to the Catholic Church of his youth. Augustine does not state specifically what texts from Paul he read.

Ferrari, however, finds "more revealing" Augustine's comments in the *Expositio quarundam propositionum ex Epistola ad Romanos*, written in 394.

Here, one would think, is an instance where Augustine cannot avoid expatiating upon Romans XIII, 13-14. Such an expectation is not entirely doomed to disappointment. Augustine comments very briefly upon verse 11 in chapter 13 and then passes directly on to take up the very last words of verse 14: *et carnis providentiam ne feceritis in concupiscentiis*. This omission means ignoring the reveling and drunkenness and other vices condemned by Paul. More significantly, it constitutes an omission of consideration of Paul's advice to put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Most significantly of all, it constitutes an omission of all but the last words of Romans XIII, 13-14. (pp. 12-13)

Ferrari continues:

It is therefore a very casual treatment of those very same verses to which Augustine is soon to attribute his conversion in the *Confessions* a conversion which occurred some eight years before the writing of the *Expositio*. And within six years, the *Confessions* is to appear with its high-lighting of the impact of Romans XIII, 13-14 right at the climactic moment of Augustine's conversions. (p. 13)

Ferrari thinks this incredible: "What remains of the ecstatic impact in the appropriate sections of the *Expositio*?" he asks. "What remains there of the role of those Pauline verses in the unforgettable conversion-scene in the *Confessions*? Verse 13 is not even singled out for comment. Of the fourteenth verse, only the last few words are selected for exegesis" (p. 13). Ferrari wonders: "How could he comment even on the verse-fragment some eight years later without betraying some acknowledgment of the profound spiritual revolution which that particular text had wrought in his life during the conversion-scene of the *Confessions*" (13-14)?

This is not a question that will go away easily, and Ferrari's astonishment is not at all misplaced. Certainly, the occasion of the text lends itself to speculation as to why Augustine chose not to speak more directly about his conversion, but it should hardly be considered

conclusive proof that the latter account in *Confessions* 8.12.29 is fabricated.

Ferrari's disappointment is equally in view when he considers Letter 22, sent to Aurelius Bishop of Carthage, though this time Ferrari changes his tune. Ferrari claims that the citation of Romans 13.13-14 in Letter 22 is irrelevant to his present concerns. But why should it be, when Augustine's references to Romans 13.13-14 are so few? What does Letter 22 present to make it insignificant and irrelevant in this discussion when the issue at stake is Augustine's early citations of Romans 13.13-14? Ferrari claims that the reason for citing Romans 13.13-14 is that Augustine is dealing with a "question of rioting and drunkenness (*commessiones et ebrietates*) which not only are publically tolerated, but even are a feature of the ceremonies to honour the memories of the blessed martyrs." And so "it would be difficult to find a scriptural quotation more pointedly appropriate to condemning these most unholy practices than Romans XIII, 13-14. Its presence on this occasion could therefore hardly be considered significant in terms of the purpose of this present study" (p. 14). So it appears Augustine did not have to write about his conversion experience when he was having to comment on the act of public rioting and drunkenness which occasioned his citation of Romans 13.13-14 because the context was hardly significant to his own personal experience.

And yet there is much in Letter 22 that indicates that it is indeed a special case, but not along the dismissive lines that Ferrari suggests. It is the only place in Augustine's corpus with the exception of the conversion scene in *Confessions* 8.12.29 where Augustine mentions Alypius' renunciation of the world and Romans 13.13-14 within a few paragraphs of each other. There is no hint in the letter that someone else had suggested the passage to Augustine. If anything, it is Augustine who presents it to Aurelius as a critique of certain accepted practices in the African church which he believed needed to be addressed. Far from being incidental to Ferrari's concerns, the use of Romans 13.13-14 in Letter 22 establishes unequivocally that Augustine saw it as a rubric for his conception of worldly renunciation. Letter 22, then, provides one of the earliest clues for the conversion scene that is later recounted at *Confessions* 8.12.29.

To buttress his case, Ferrari turns his attention to Augustine's references to Romans 14.1ff., the passage where Alypius read the phrase "receive the person who is weak in faith" and took as his own call to conversion (*Confessions* 8.12.30). Ferrari takes this as yet

another piece of the puzzle, showing how unimportant Romans 13.13-14.1 was to Augustine prior to writing the *Confessions*. The use of Romans 14.1 in describing Alypius conversion is another fabrication, part of the "artistic embellishments added later in Augustine's carefully constructed portrayal of their conversion" (17). The *tolle lege* scene "would thus be a fiction of Augustine's genius" (p. 17). To grant an author such artistry and to claim a misrepresentation as a work of genius curiously accords honor to an art which on any reading would be deemed dubious. But Ferrari manages this with a certitude at once perplexing and uncompromising, as he never once poses the question as to how Alypius could have been talked into this "artful deception."

Now Ferrari explains what actually happened, and for this he turns to the Cassiciacum dialogues. Take, for example, his explanation of Augustine's brief narrative of his conversion in *De beata vita* 1.4, where Augustine talks about reading scripture after his encounter with the books of the Platonists. Noticeably, Augustine makes no specific mention of Paul in his epistolary comments in *De beata vita*. Still, it is not difficult to imagine that this is what he has in mind when he writes about comparing the books of the Platonists "with the authority of those who have handed down the divine mysteries" with the effect that he soon gave up his secular career (*De beata vita* 1.4).

And yet, Ferrari writes that "notwithstanding this omission, the description in the *Confessions* makes it abundantly clear that Paul was of especial interest to Augustine in that initial venture into the Scriptures" (p. 18). But why does Ferrari see the need to use the later account in the *Confessions* to explain an omission in a narrative from 386, when that very narrative mentions the authority of those who have handed down the divine mysteries as the turning point of Augustine's conversion narrative? Augustine is explicit about his Pauline readings in *Contra Academicos*, written at the same time as *De beata vita*. Ferrari seems indifferent to *Contra Academicos*, though, and insists that the reference in *Contra Academicos* to Augustine's pre-conversion Pauline readings must be to *Confessions* 7.21.27 exclusively. In which case, Augustine could not possibly be alluding to *Confessions* 8.12.29. But upon this reading, one cannot make sense of Augustine's claim in *Contra Academicos* that after reading Paul he was converted.

III. "Saint Augustine on the Road to Damascus"

In the article "Saint Augustine on the Road to Damascus"⁷ Ferrari shifts his focus away from the use of Romans 13.13-14 specifically to the narrative found in Acts 9.1-9 about Paul's conversion. Since Ferrari insists that he has already proved the fictional nature of Augustine's reading of Romans 13.13-14 in *Confessions* 8 in the 'tolle lege' scene in the previous article (pp. 151-152), he can now proceed to show exactly how Augustine went about fictionalizing other elements of his narrative. According to Ferrari, Augustine deliberately wrote his narrative under the influence of Paul's conversion recounted in Acts 9.1-9, and therefore sought to provide an account of God's gracious act in redeeming the wayward Augustine in a manner similar to what happened to Paul on the road to Damascus. This is supposed to be so obvious and self-evident as to require little argument. "To those familiar with the works of Augustine, the influence of Paul is too obvious to require labouring here. Further, the presence of Paul becomes particularly powerful with the approach of the conversion scene in the *Confessions*. Indeed, so powerful is this presence that one is justified in wondering if it may not extend even further to the actual shaping of the events of the conversion-scene" (p. 152).

Here Ferrari adopts an interesting and somewhat simplistic standpoint about the supposed Pauline resonances, allusions, and citations in the *Confessions* 8.12.29-30. Ferrari claims that "in considering the account which we have of Paul's conversion, there is the fact that, as with Augustine, the account is by the subject of the conversion, namely by Paul himself" (p. 152), citing as evidence Acts 22.6-15 and 26.12-18. Yet he acknowledges that the account in Acts 9.1-19 is in the third person (p. 152 n. 8). The narrative in Acts is not Paul's. And so a comparison with Augustine's own self-representation may be problematic.

Ferrari sees other similarities as, for example, the fact that both Paul and Augustine fall to the ground "immediately prior to the events" and that in both cases "there are silent witnesses to the event" (p. 153); and in addition "immediately prior to the supernatural communication in each case, there was an affecting of the eyes with Paul being blinded and with Augustine weeping copiously with tears" (p.153). This is simplistic at best.

⁷ Leo C. FERRARI, "Saint Augustine on the Road to Damascus", *Augustinian Studies* 13 (1982): 151-170.

Equally questionable is the alleged similarity in both men "falling to the ground" and that both men "had to depart from the place where they had heard the voice and receive final enlightenment in another place" (p. 153). While *Acts* and the *Confessions* respectively depict Paul and Augustine responding to a voice, Paul recognizes the voice as that of Christ, while Augustine wonders from whence it comes. Augustine also states unequivocally that he understood himself to be following in the footsteps of Antony of Egypt, when he took the words "*tolle lege*" as a divine injunction. Remarkably, Ferrari is silent about the explicit reference to Antony in *Confessions* 8.12. Not once does he mention it.

Ferrari believes he can find still more evidence of Augustine's dependence on Paul's conversion story. According to Ferrari, even the words which lie behind both the divine injunction to Paul and what Augustine took as a divine word sound alike. The one says "*Saule, Saule, quare me persequeris?*" The other, "*Tolle, lege, tolle, lege.*" A comparison between the two phrases, Ferrari claims, shows a "peculiar assonance" (pp. 153-154). Together with the alleged similarities in the patterns of two narratives, this peculiar assonance, then "would suggest that Augustine's account of his conversion in the *Confessions* is a description which owes much to the account of the conversion of Paul, whom he so loved and admired" (p. 154). There is surprisingly little here that amounts to anything like textual evidence of Augustine's use of the Pauline narrative in *Acts* as a pattern for his own. Ferrari's approach is merely impressionistic.

But Ferrari remains convinced. He believes he can show that during the period when Augustine was writing the *Confessions* Augustine had become fascinated with Paul's conversion story. The evidence of Augustine's allusions to Paul's conversion during the period 397-401, for Ferrari, explains the patterning that he claims in *Confessions* 8.

After making the bold claim that Augustine uses Paul's conversion story in *Acts* as a model for his own, Ferrari is at pains to prove that Augustine's citations of *Acts* cluster around the period 397-401, just when Augustine becomes interested in Paul's narrative (p. 156). Ferrari also equivocates on what he wants to make of Augustine's knowledge of Paul's narrative during his Manichaean years.

Ferrari surmises that "as a convert with a Manichaean background, Augustine may well have continued to remain suspicious of that work [*Acts*], at least for the first few years after his conversion" (p. 156), ostensibly because the Manichaeans held *Acts* in disrepute.

But Acts is not the only place one can gain some understanding of Paul's conversion. Another point worth making is that if the Manichaeans objected to the Acts of the Apostles, they also objected to the entire Old Testament, and yet Augustine sought to offer interpretations of Old Testament texts that he believed could persuade them. The reasons for his apparent silence on Acts, then, may not be as simple as Ferrari supposes. Besides, one cannot argue on the one hand that Augustine could not have known about Paul's conversion during his Manichaean days, and still insist on the other hand that the Pauline impress in Augustine's immediate post-conversion period dates from his Manichaean background. And yet Ferrari insists on both (p. 156).

Ferrari argues that the disparity between citing Paul repeatedly in the early works and Acts so few times (and only in the period after 394) also shows how Augustine was becoming more taken with the story of Paul's conversion. He points out that "beginning in 396 and extending through the succeeding five years until 401, there is to be found in Augustine's writings a most interesting cluster of references to Paul's conversion" and that the *Contra epistolam Manichaei quam vocant fundamenti* 5.6 of 396 "contains an allusion to the story of Paul's conversion as being well known: 'In eodem etiam libro [i.e. *Acta Apostolorum de vocatione atque apostolatu Pauli vulgatissimam tenemus historiam*]' (p. 158). He then points out that "again in the same year, at the end of the first book of the *De diversis questionibus ad Simplicianum*, the topic of Paul's conversion is adduced as an example of conversion through divine election of the will, which election is not in the power of man to achieve. Further, Augustine describes how Paul was laid low and transformed from a marvellous persecutor of the Church to a more marvellous preacher, by that divine voice calling him but once: '*una de super voce prostratus*'" (p. 158). And again in that same year, "another allusion to Paul's conversion is to be found in the prologue to the *De doctrina christiana*. In the fifth paragraph of that prologue, Augustine warns against the presumption of those who despise human means of instruction in God's word and expect to be caught up into the third heaven (cf. II Cor. 12.2-4) there to be instructed by Christ."

Ferrari mentions next Augustine's comments in the sixth paragraph of the prologue of *De doctrina christiana* about how Paul, though called by a divine voice, was nevertheless instructed to go to another human being, namely Cornelius, for instruction. The Damascus road experience is clearly in view here, and Augustine's comments in *Contra epistolam Manichaei quam vocant fundamenti*, *De diversis questionibus*, and *De doctrina christiana* attests to his

interest in Paul's conversion story. It is the surest evidence Ferrari has for his thesis. Yet it founders on a simple problem. Why does Augustine mention the conversion of Antony the monk of Egypt as his model (*Confessions* 8.6.14 and 8.12.29) and pattern his entire conversion scene upon Ponticianus' visit (*Confessions* 8.6.14)?

There is no question that Paul looms large in Augustine's thinking, but this is not quite the same thing as saying that Augustine was so enamored of Paul's conversion that he was quite willing to invent his own past to fit Paul's story. Ferrari, as we have already observed, takes the "divine word" which came to Paul as the inspiration for Augustine's *tolle lege* scene. And yet by his own admission, Augustine's comments in *De diversis questionibus LXXXIII* 66.6 "betrays no emotional associations of one who had supposedly undergone a remarkably similar experience to Paul's in the not too distant past" (p. 157). This is consistent throughout Augustine's early works. Not once does he claim Paul's conversion as the pattern for his own. What should be enough to dissuade Ferrari from his elaborate conjectures emerges as yet another support for his theory.

Remarkably, Ferrari takes *De diversis questionibus LXXXIII* 66.6 as proof positive that the later account is fabricated and does not reflect the conversion of the distant past in 386, because of Augustine's non-emotional commentary on the subject of Paul's conversion. But, if Paul isn't Augustine's model then there is no need for such. Nor is there need to be scandalized at the fact that he displays "no excitement about the fact that Paul too had received that communication in the most extraordinary manner which consisted of a divine voice" (p. 157).

What is more, there is no reference in any of Paul's various conversion narratives that he was inspired to convert by the reading of a book, or by someone preaching to him, whereas in the story of Antony of Egypt to which Augustine alludes there is such a basis: Antony is converted by a reading from the Gospels, Augustine is converted by reading Paul. The basic pattern cannot be overlooked without doing too much violence to Augustine's narrative. If Augustine continues to refer to the divine word which came to Paul and says little about his own personal experience in *De doctrina Christiana* and the *Contra epistulam Manichaei quam vocant fundamenti*, Ferrari ought to recognize this as the surest sign that Augustine is to be believed when he claims the story of Antony as the inspiration for his own conversion by a "divine word" in 386.

Ferrari, however, does not tire of trying to provide a rationale

for why Augustine needed to model his conversion after Paul's, even suggesting that Augustine needed this in order to dispel any suspicions about his Manichaean past. Ferrari maintains that "had Augustine been converted in the manner described in the *Confessions*, then the remarkable similarity of his conversion to that of Paul would no doubt have dramatically overcome any suspicions he may have had, at least about that conversion, so that he would have begun to allude to it early in his writings, and perhaps also to certain other passages from the Acts. But since neither of these conditions is fulfilled, all the stronger is the evidence that Paul's conversion was not of personal significance to Augustine prior to 396" (p. 159). There is almost no basis for the conclusion Ferrari adduces here.

In the critical period (397-401) during which Ferrari claims to find Augustine's conscious efforts to appropriate Paul's conversion story Augustine's comments on Paul's conversion focus on one singular detail: Paul's divine calling (pp. 159-160). If Ferrari's objective was to provide some kind of chronology that would reveal Augustine's interest in Paul's divine calling, there would be little to question. So, why Ferrari remains adamant in his conviction that Paul's conversion narrative is the model for Augustine conversion scene is difficult to understand. Ferrari's subsequent arguments are even less persuasive, making any ameliorating gestures towards salvaging his position nearly impossible.⁸

The number of allusions to Paul's conversion which Ferrari finds in Augustine's sermons, including the *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, show a pattern similar to the one we have already observed. Again, on Ferrari's own reading, Augustine does not take those opportunities to comment on his own conversion as somehow following the pattern of Paul's (pp. 162-167). Ferrari is astonished that in Sermon 12 (c. 393-395) where Augustine speaks about how "God has been known to communicate with mortal man" (pp. 166), Augustine does not allude to his own conversion when he mentions Paul receiving a divine word from Heaven. "What is interesting here," Ferrari observes, "is that Augustine comes so close to the classical case of Paul's conversion, without citing it as an example" (p. 166). And then Ferrari makes his now characteristic assertion that "from this omission, it would seem that in the time period of 393-395, that particular conversion was not of particular significance to Augustine" (p. 166). Ferrari continues, claiming yet another significant fact, because when he comments on

⁸ See J. J. O'DONNELL, *Augustine: Confessions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992) III, 67.

hearing a voice, Augustine writes in Sermon 12.4.4 that he “believed in such voices from Heaven *by having read of them*.” Ferrari believes that *legimus et credimus* stands “in contrast to the first-hand personal experience of having been the subject of just such a communication.” “This latter possibility,” he contends, “would have been fulfilled less than ten years previously if Augustine had really been the subject of the *tolle lege* episode exactly as described in the eighth book of the *Confessions*. That Augustine relies upon reading for knowledge of such mysterious manners of communication, contradicts yet once again, the claimed factuality of the conversion scene” (p. 166). But all of this assumes that Augustine must have his conversion scene in the background of this thoughts as he speaks to his audience in this particular sermon.

That Augustine does not mention God speaking to Paul on the road to Damascus is curious but inconclusive. For, while he cites a number of examples from scripture, Augustine’s list is highly selective, though also intended to be comprehensive. There is no mention of Abraham or David, for example. Instead Augustine adopts a general reference to the “patriarchs, prophets, and apostles”, a designation that just about covers most of the central characters in the scriptures. To proceed from this to the assertion that Augustine’s comments imply an indifference on his part towards Paul’s conversion is highly questionable, especially since Augustine had been commenting on different parts of the Pauline corpus from the time of his conversion. That Augustine does not mention that he too had received a word from God is nearly irrelevant.

Ironically, Ferrari provides much of the evidence which contradicts his claims. About Sermon 279 (c. 401), for example, Ferrari admits that it is devoted to Paul’s conversion and “in this regard is unique among all the extant sermons of Augustine” (p. 167). There is, however, little in it to lend credence to what Ferrari has been arguing. He acknowledges that “it is a monument to the interest of Augustine in that [Paul’s] conversion in the year 401, when he was completing the composition of the *Confessions*. However, apart from its lengthy and general preoccupation with Paul’s conversion, the sermon has not been found to contain details of relevance to the present topic” (p. 167). In fact, it is far more relevant than Ferrari allows. Its irrelevance to Ferrari stems from the fact that it contradicts the grand scheme Ferrari has proposed, namely Augustine’s reading of Paul and Augustine’s fictionalized conversion scene as a parallel narrative to Paul’s.

After sidestepping the counter-argument contained in what

Augustine says in Sermon 279 (c. 401), Ferrari turns his attention to another sermon, Sermon 89 (c. 396-7), where he finds Augustine commenting on Jesus and the cursed fig-tree of Matthew 21.19-22 and the encounter with Nathaniel under the fig-tree of John 1.45-48. Ferrari, like previous interpreters, sees some similarities between Nathaniel's experience under the fig tree and Augustine's reception of Christ under the fig tree in Milan. But Ferrari, following Courcelle and others, sees more, especially because Augustine links "Christ's promise to Nathaniel that he would see angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man" with the words of the Son of Man to Saul/Paul "*Saule, Saule, quid me persequeris*" (p. 168). Ferrari takes this as establishing some connection between the fig-tree and Saul's conversion. In which case, when Augustine mentions falling under a certain fig-tree and then hears words which resonate with the words Saul/Paul heard, we can be confident that we have identified the inspiration for the fiction which is Augustine's conversion scene. If Ferrari could in fact show or provide any evidence of Augustine identifying his conversion experience with Paul's even in one of the many references to Paul's conversion found in Augustine's vast corpus, he might have a point. That nothing of this sort is to be found is telling. Add to this Augustine's explicit reference to the story of Antony as his model and we have every reason to believe that Ferrari's view not only lacks merit, but is so misleading as to offer no real benefit towards understanding what Augustine does in *Confessions* 8.12.29.

In his 1982 St. Augustine Lecture, Ferrari once again repeated the views contained in the two earlier essays about Augustine's conversion scene.

IV. "An Analysis of Augustine's Conversional Reading (Conf. 8.12,29)"

In his "An Analysis of Augustine's Conversional Reading (Conf. 8.12,29)"⁹ Ferrari attempts to explain why Augustine chose Romans 13.13-14 from among all the other verses in Paul's letters which could have served his purposes. To say that the task Ferrari sets himself is nearly impossible to achieve would be an understatement. Ferrari begins with Galatians 5.19-21: "Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity,

⁹ Leo C. FERRARI, "An Analysis of Augustine's Conversional Reading (Conf. 8.12,29)", *Augustinian Studies* 18 (1987).

strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like." As Ferrari notes, "Augustine cites, or alludes to this passage on a dozen occasions in works of the relevant period. The earliest occurrence is in the *De sermone Domini in monte* of 394 where Augustine lists various sins, fairly much as above. Three other works of this and the next two years contain lists in substantial agreement with the previous one. Interestingly enough, the next four years of 396 through 399 are devoid of references to the scriptural passage" (p. 31).

Ferrari finds this last detail interesting because he wants to argue that the two verses lost their relevance just when Augustine was writing the *Confessions*, just when Augustine had become enamored of other Pauline texts. He wonders why Augustine doesn't use these verses in the earlier period from 386 to 394, "when he had only recently renounced such sins" (p. 31)? "The same expectation," Ferrari contends, "is encouraged by the dramatic events of the conversion scene with its highlighting of the sins of the flesh, not to mention their condemnation elsewhere in the eighth book" (p. 31). Since "those dramatic events are commonly accepted as describing that early conversion" Ferrari is surprised that Augustine does not refer to Galatians 5.19-21 for another eight years (p. 32). He also finds puzzling why there is a cluster of references to these verses in 394-396 and another cluster in 400-401 but none in 396-399. The lacuna, he argues, "is all the more surprising in that in these same years, Augustine was planning and writing the first books of the *Confessions*. Presumably, his preoccupation in this work with the sins of the flesh did not extend to Gal. 5.19-21" (p. 32). But isn't this a rather odd expectation?

While Ferrari acknowledges that Augustine does not always recite the list of sins found in the former completely or identically, he is nevertheless convinced that the various ways in which Augustine cites the two verses suggest a particular appeal for him. And in light of that appeal to Augustine "in the years 394 through 401, one may well ask why it was not chosen for the conversional reading, rather than Rom. 13, 13-14" (p. 32). Ferrari returns to his dramatic theory. "The lists of sins is about twice as long as that of Rom. 13,13-14" he asserts, "and so a dramatic impact of the conversion scene would have been considerably weakened by the mere reading of lengthy list of vices" (p. 32). This is an interesting tack. But it lacks merit.

Ferrari proceeds towards another rationale. He maintains that another reason for Augustine's choice of Romans 13.13-14 is that the Galatians passage is "impersonally descriptive," while the former "is

personally applicable to Augustine's particular case" (p. 33). But if that is the case, why all the anxiety about the need for Augustine to cite Galatians? Ferrari believes that Romans 13.13-14 is so apt, because "unlike Gal. 5.19-21, it is succinctly sin-negating and hortative. It briefly negates three pairs of sins and terminates in an exhortation which also points quite definitely in the new direction for Augustine: 'put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof'" (p. 33).

Ferrari then turns to 1 Corinthians 6.9-10: "Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor sexual perverts, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God." Ferrari observes that Augustine alludes to this verse in 394 and cites the complete list in his expositions of Galatians (394-395), Letter 29.5, and in the *De diversis questionibus LXXXIII* 76.2. Letter 29 is dated 395, and *De diversis questionibus LXXXIII* is completed in that same year. Ferrari once again expresses surprise that Augustine does not cite 1 Corinthians 6.9-10 in the years 396-399, "which corresponds exactly with the lacuna observed above in the case of Gal. 5.19-21" (p. 33). And yet Augustine uses both passages interchangeably in the *De baptismo* and the *Contra Epistolam Parmeniani* (400). Ferrari makes much of the "missing references" from the 396-399 without so much as asking what works would have contained the references if they had been made.

When Ferrari compares 1 Corinthians 6.6-9 and Romans 13.13-14 he argues that the former would be inappropriate for Augustine's purposes because 1 Corinthians 6.9-10 "features more varieties of sexual sin," whereas Romans 13.13-14 does not (p. 33). And because the latter speaks in general terms it fit Augustine's situation better. Furthermore, besides sexual sin the only other sin they have in common is drunkenness. To his credit, Ferrari acknowledges that "considering the emphasis on sexual sins in 1 Cor 6.9-10 and also in the eighth book of the *Confessions* ... one could perhaps expect that the former would have made a good text for the conversional reading in the latter" (p. 34). He insists, however, that "a divinely directed reading from 1 Cor 6.9-10 would have had Augustine being implicitly accused of some very specific sins, mostly sexual in nature" (p. 34). He seems to think there would be no such problems with regards to Galatians 5.19-21 about sorcery, or even with the robbery mentioned in 1 Corinthians 6.9-10. Ferrari once again adverts to his "dramatic theory," saying that a list of ten sins would lose its dramatic effect. But all this is presumption.

There are other texts for Ferrari to explain. He turns to Romans 1.29-31, where Paul provides a catalogue of ungodliness. "They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless." "For all its length," Ferrari observes, "the above list does not contain rioting, drunkenness, chambering and wantonness. Indeed, if 1 Cor. 6,9-10 concentrates on sexual sins, the above list omits them altogether" (p. 34). Ferrari now finds an entirely new reason why this list would not have found favor with Augustine: it was not "as popular" with him (p. 34).

Ferrari mentions Colossians 3.5-6 as the other Pauline text which comes close to doing all the things that Ferrari claims for his "dramatic theory". It is brief, has almost all the sins that Augustine highlights in the conversion scene, and, unlike the other passages, Augustine refers to this in works written in 397-400, the critical period Ferrari has often pointed to. So how does Ferrari explain the choice of Romans 13.13-14 over Colossians 3.5-6, when the latter also has the advantage of beginning with a command in its first sentence? Ferrari's reasoning is brilliantly confounding. He claims that "compared with Rom. 13,13-14, the list of Col. 3,5-6 has the dramatically desirable virtue of succinctness, but is neither as forcefully, nor as repetitively sin-negating as Rom. 13,13-14 with its *non ... non ... non ...*. Furthermore, as the extract shows, Col. 3,5-6 ends with an ominous warning quite unconnected with the closing events of the conversion. By contrast, the exhortation of Rom. 13,13-14, to put on the Lord Jesus Christ, leads directly into those events, and indeed they are 'justified' by the conversational reading itself" (p. 35).

If this is how we should understand Augustine's craft, then much is lost. Ferrari proceeds to say that "we are left then with Rom. 13,13-14 as Paul's list of sins most suitable for the reading in the conversion scene. Rom. 13,13-14 alone has what is lacking in all the lists considered. It possesses dramatic brevity, is sin-negating in a suitably general manner, as a direct (as opposed to indirect) addressability to Augustine's particular case and leads on to the important exhortation to put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (p. 35). Certainly, putting on the Lord Jesus Christ is a fitting conclusion to the reading. Yet when that language of putting on Christ occurs in the early writings Ferrari does not seem to notice (*De moribus ecclesiae catholicae*, in particular).

After his discussion of the other possible Pauline texts which

could have served Augustine's purposes for the supposedly invented conversion scene, Ferrari turns to consider what should now be described as his "thematic analysis." Here Ferrari hopes to show that the themes that surround the conversion scene in *Confessions* 8 suggested other possibilities to Augustine which he did not take up because only Romans 13.13-14 fit the dramatic intent of his narrative.

Ferrari identifies three inter-related dualisms: flesh and spirit, old and new, mind and body. These are themes to which Augustine also returns in *Confessions* 10. Galatians 5.17 provides a starting point because Augustine cites it at *Confessions* 8.5.11 as a point of departure for describing how he understood his experiences: "In this way I understood through my own personal experience what I had read, how 'the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh.' I was split between them, but more of me was in that which I approved in myself than in that which I disapproved."¹⁰

Now, if Ferrari's theory is to hold that Augustine cites texts relevant to the conversion scene that he is inventing only during the period 396/7-400/1, one should not expect Augustine to cite Galatians 5.22-23 in the earlier period from 386 to 396, since that would mean that the tension between flesh and spirit was something he recognized in himself even as far back as 386. But what does Ferrari find? On his own account Augustine mentions this conflict in a number of works (p. 47 n. 32): *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* 2, 25, 38 (388-389); *De sermone Domini in monte* 2, 21, 81 (394); *Ep.* 29, 6 (395); *Sermo* 89, 1 (396-7); *De baptismo* 1, 18, 27 (400-1). These references also seem to correspond in broad outline with the use of Galatians 5.17 and 1 Corinthians 6.9-10, with the exception of the two citations from *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* and *De sermone Domini in monte*. Augustine's allusions to Galatians 5.22-23, then, cannot be separated from his use of Galatians 5.17 and 1 Corinthians 6.9-10.

Ferrari, however, seeks an entirely different construal. He turns to the other contrast involving the spirit and the letter (2 Corinthians 3.6), a contrast Augustine emphasizes in *Ad Simplicianum* (p. 36). Ferrari then links Augustine's use of the spirit and letter with the flesh-spirit dualism and eventually to the notion of the old and new from Romans 7.6, in the process sidestepping the use of Galatians 5.17, 22-23 and 1 Corinthians 6.9-10. All this is supposed to lead up to the notion that while the contrast between flesh and spirit resembles the one between the old and the new found in Romans 7.6, the themes that

¹⁰ *Saint Augustine: Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 140.

occur around the conversion scene in Book 8 of the *Confessions* are influenced by Augustine's "paulinizing" (p. 37) of his narrative.

Ferrari acknowledges the centrality of the spirit-flesh dualism for the entire narrative. But while admitting that "Augustine's preoccupation with the spirit-flesh conflict of Gal. 5.17 predates the *Confessions*," Ferrari also sees something highly significant in Augustine's first citation of Galatians 5.17. Strangely, Ferrari uses the first occurrence of Galatians 5.17 as a way of delimiting the scope of what he had just argued, namely, Augustine's use of the flesh-spirit themes found in Galatians 5.22-23 in the early works.

Ferrari's fastidiousness is rather beguiling, for he assumes that Augustine could not allude to Galatians 5.17 by citing any of the other verses from Galatians 5.18-23. For someone who makes much of the fact that Augustine's modern interpreters have been misled by interpreting Augustine as if he lived in a book and print culture,¹¹ Ferrari's insistence on such narrowly defined textual specificity as the only kind of evidence suggestive of significance and relevance is remarkable.

Romans 7.14-25 not only contains the contrast between the flesh and the spirit, it also underscores the very problem of the divided will to which Augustine calls attention in Book 8 of the *Confessions*. And as Ferrari himself acknowledges, Augustine alludes to this passage from very early on in his career: on Ferrari's reckoning "ten times in works of 393 or earlier" (p. 40). Moreover, Augustine continues to cite or allude to this passage in works from 394 to 401, with Ferrari acknowledging a peak in both 395 and 399 (p. 40). This is the sort of evidence that would give anyone pause in making the kind of arguments that Ferrari proposes. All this notwithstanding, Ferrari contends that the preponderance of Romans 7.14-25 "exhibits something of a random distribution" because it is attested even in the 396-401 period when Augustine was writing the *Confessions* (p. 40). To put it simply, because the evidence subverts Ferrari's theory (that it ought not be cited in the 396-401 period) its distribution must be deemed uncharacteristic and therefore random. This is a bald misrepresentation at best.

Oddly, Ferrari offers the following explanation for the "persistent appeal." "The most obvious reason for this persistent appeal would seem to derive from Augustine's years with the Manichees and their doctrine of the rebellious, evil principle in the

¹¹ Leo C. FERRARI, "Saint Augustine's Conversion Scene: The End of a Modern Debate?" *Studia Patristica* 22 (1989), 242-243.

body" (p. 41). Ferrari grants that the Manichaean rationale he offers to explain Augustine's use of Romans 7.14-25 could be applied to Galatians 5.17, making his argument about the absence of the latter in the early works vacuous. After all, if Romans 7.14-25 serves as a good rebuttal of Manichaean arguments why shouldn't Galatians 5.17? Ferrari does not consider why Galatians 5.17 in itself would not furnish an answer to the Manichees.

At the same time, Ferrari is willing to see in Augustine's use of Romans 7.14-25 further evidence of his theory that Augustine has adopted the Pauline conversion narrative as a way of telling his own story. In so doing Ferrari changes the parameters of his argument slightly. In the earlier essays, Ferrari insisted that the absence of Romans 13.13-14 in Augustine's works prior to the *Confessions* provided one of the clues supporting the view that the passage had only become important to Augustine at the time of writing the *Confessions*. In which case, the use of the verses in the *tolle lege* scene gives the surest indication of the alleged fabrication of that scene. Ferrari also insisted that it was only during the time of writing the *Confessions* that Augustine began to take an interest in Paul's conversion story. Now in dealing with Romans 7.14-25, which is well-attested in Augustine's works through 401 when the *Confessions* was completed, Ferrari adopts a different approach.

Ferrari argues that one reason why Romans 7.14-25 appealed to Augustine is that Paul appeared to be speaking of a personal experience, and this apparent personalization of the conflict between flesh and spirit attracted Augustine's attention: "this revelation" of Paul "baring his soul about his own inner conflict within himself ... met with a heartfelt response in Augustine who apparently was all too aware of the same conflict within himself" (p. 41). But if this is the case, and Augustine cites Romans 7.14-25 from 393 up to 401, then there is little reason to think that Augustine only became interested in these themes at the time when he was writing the *Confessions*. Moreover, if it is Paul's personal reminiscences in Romans 7.14-25 which must have resonated with Augustine, as Ferrari suggests, there might be a problem. It would mean that Augustine had always been interested in Paul's conversion from as early as 393 when he cites Romans 7.14-25 and not only when he began to write the *Confessions*, as Ferrari claims. But Ferrari leaves this avenue untouched, even as he claims, "that the Paul of Rom. 7.14-25 with his self revelations, was the original inspiration for the self-revelations of the *Confessions* in general, and of the conversion scene in particular. And so it seems, there resulted the descriptions of Augustine's conversion, a description

transparently modelled on the conversion of his great hero Paul," as he claims to have shown elsewhere in his "Saint Augustine on the Road to Damascus."¹² But if Romans 7.14-25 is the inspiration, why does Augustine select Romans 13.13-14 as the text that effected his conversion?

By now we have come to expect that Ferrari needs to discount what does not fit into the grand scheme he proposed in his 1980 article. He continues in this vein at the conclusion of this current essay. Instead of taking Augustine's use of the notion of putting off and putting on Christ in Ephesians 4.22-24 and Colossians 3.9-10 as his point of departure for understanding how Augustine appropriates this theme in his early writings, Ferrari turns surprisingly to Galatians 3.27 (for as many of you as were baptized in Christ, have put on Christ). To begin with, this is language Augustine probably could not have used prior to his baptism in 387, and so would have been inappropriate in the *Cassiciacum* dialogues.

In his immediate post-baptismal period we have the *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* as evidence of Augustine's use of the putting off/putting on theme. Ferrari, however, finds a way to argue that

it would seem to be that Paul's putting on of Christ was not a significant feature of Augustine's earlier life, but rather of the time of writing the *Confessions*, and even then, apparently only after it had been brought to his attention by Faustus in 397-398. Yet, supposedly the putting on of Christ was the climax of the divinely directed conversional reading in 386. Its absence in the intervening years is all the more amazing in view of Augustine's confession that at the beginning of his conversion, he could not find a way of enjoying God until he had embraced Jesus (7,18,24). (p. 43)

It is not clear which is more confusing, the sheer unintelligibility of Ferrari's words here or his claim of being surprised at Augustine's "method." How tenable is the following upon which Ferrari ends? "One possible explanation of the absences of references to the putting on of Christ prior to the writing of the *Confessions* is that he had discovered Christ as mediator which was also a Manichean notion, but his Manichean mind had rebelled at the notion of putting on Christ, as required by Gal. 3,27. However, even this seems unlikely as an explanation, since Faustus used the figure of speech in the context noted above. Therefore, the amazing conclusion would seem to follow, that despite his protestation in the *Confessions* (7,18,24), the

¹² Leo C. FERRARI, "Saint Augustine on the Road to Damascus", *Augustinian Studies* 13 (1982): 151-170.

putting on of Christ was not of particular significance to the conversion of Augustine" (p. 43). These are the sorts of strategies Ferrari commends to Augustine's interpreters.

V. "Beyond Augustine's Conversion Scene"

In "Beyond Augustine's Conversion Scene"¹³ Ferrari finally acknowledged that his argument about Augustine's use of Romans 13.13-14 is basically an argument from silence. Still, he was convinced his theories from all those previous studies stand because of all the evidence he has provided of Augustine's Pauline citations (p. 98). Ferrari assesses other Pauline texts which could have served Augustine's purposes. And he arrives at the same conclusion: Romans 13.13-14 and that alone could have served Augustine's fictive purposes. The more texts he analyzes the more astonishing the claims he has to make in defense of his views.

After reviewing Colossians 3.10, Ephesians 2.2 and Ephesians 5.8, Ferrari contends that "their very occurrences in such numbers contradict the claim that the occasion had not arisen for Augustine to quote Romans 13.13-14" (p. 99). And this, because, if Augustine had been converted by Romans 13.13-14 as he claims, "then verses of similar tone would have been suitably substituted and so explain the popularity of the above-mentioned verses. But the most frequently cited of such verses, as selected above, display a most inconvenient distribution for supporting such a claim" (100). This is untenable in the extreme.

After prosecuting his highly idiosyncratic and untenable argument all along, Ferrari now ventures to ask the question implicit in his commentary: Was Augustine simply lying about his past? And how would a claim about Augustine's fabrications stand in the face of Augustine's *De mendacio* (395) and the later *Contra Mendacium*? In attempting to answer these questions Ferrari also begins to consider other issues he seemed to have overlooked previously.

Ferrari admits that Augustine's comments at *Confessions* 3.2.2-4 about the degenerative influences of the theater is a possible objection to the notion of the *Confessions* "as a script for dramatic performance" (p. 103). This objection, Ferrari believes is "easily answered by pointing out that the theatre is there condemned for its portrayal of lust," and that "it is significant that Augustine there

¹³ Leo FERRARI, "Beyond Augustine's Conversion Scene", in *Augustine: From Rhetor to Theologian*, ed. Joanne McWilliam (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), 97-107.

condemns theatre for promoting grief, not over real people's misfortunes, but over mere fictions" (p. 103). Ferrari believes that this does not apply to the *Confessions*: "The matter is quite otherwise in the case of the *Confessions* where the audience is invited to grieve, not over some fiction, but over the undeniable truth of Augustine's past sinfulness and his flight from God" (p. 103). Ferrari now appeals to the larger scope of Augustine's objectives and not the specifics of the conversion scene.

We gain a better sense of Ferrari's appreciation of Augustine's sensibilities when we consider what he does with Augustine's words in *Confessions* 10.3.3. This is a passage which should have received a lot of attention from Ferrari, given his contentions about Augustine's supposed fictions, because Augustine speaks to the issue of his credibility directly. Curiously, it receives a terse commentary which manages to turn Augustine's hermeneutics of *caritas* into a rationale for misrepresenting the past. This is how Ferrari states it: "noteworthy is the fact that the question of truth in the work [the *Confessions*] arises in the tenth book (10.3.3-4.6) in regard to how Augustine's audience will know that he is telling the truth. He points out there that his confession is not addressed to those who are merely curious about other people's lives, while inert about improving their own; but rather to those whose ears are opened to him by charity" (p. 103). Ferrari does not explain what exactly Augustine means by this, nor will one suspect that the tone of Ferrari's words slightly distort Augustine's point. Notice too that *Confessions* 10.3.3 makes nonsense Ferrari's questionable reading of Augustine's language about God being truth and everyone being a liar. The problem, as Augustine's identifies it in *Confessions* 10.3.3, is fundamentally one of trust.

But according to Ferrari, in the *De mendacio*, Augustine distinguishes between speaking the truth with the mouth and possessing the truth in the heart (par. 31 and 35). In which case, we are to believe that "those whose ears are opened by charity will hear and understand," even if Augustine is fabricating the details (p. 103). Furthermore, Ferrari maintains, "it is also important to notice that in the treatise *On Lying*, Augustine readily admits the legitimacy of allegory and figurative speech as expressions of truth, particularly in regard to spiritual matters, as in the case of the Bible (paras. 7-9, 26 and 42)" (pp. 103-104). Ferrari, therefore, believes that "if there were any further need to justify the dramatic liberties of the conversion scene, it would be found under this category and by a special justification" (pp. 104). Ferrari moves so effortlessly from insisting on Augustine's fictions about his past to defending Augustine as

allegorist that one would not notice that he has ignored all of Augustine's strictures in *De mendacio* about lying in the service of some supposedly divine course. What is more, Augustine's comments about the validity of allegory in *De mendacio* are not different from what he says about the use of figurative language and allegorical / spiritual interpretation in *De doctrina Christiana*, for example. It is not a rationale for forgery or mendacity, but rather a plea for respecting the uses and interpretation of the metaphorical and figurative.

Interestingly, Ferrari again returns to *Confessions* 10 (10.3.3, 10.3.4 and 10.4.6) for evidence that Augustine expected his work to be "read aloud before an assembled audience" (p. 102). He goes on to repeat his contention that "this means that the text is really a script for a dramatic performance, which throws an entirely different light on the whole question about the factuality or fictionality of the conversion scene" (p. 102). Ferrari leaves off to suggest a distinction that again confounds the issues. He claims that "writing factual biography destined for the silent reading so common today a person of Augustine's scrupulous honesty would aim at what Courcelle describes as "*exactitude sténographique*" (p. 102). This assertion concedes one thing and misconstrues another. Certainly, it is something of an event, after all these articles during which he has described Augustine as a fabricator of his past, for Ferrari to describe Augustine as scrupulously honest. On what basis? Ferrari does not say. Except, having described Augustine as such, Ferrari must now furnish a reason why Augustine's practices as an author would differ from us moderns.

It is simply false to say, as Ferrari does, that as a script for dramatic performance, the presentation, to be dramatically effective, must subordinate factuality to the canons of dramatic presentation "a craft", we are told, in which Augustine "was well-schooled" (p. 102). And so "a certain romanticizing of reality becomes inevitable, whence the Courcellean mode de presentation romanesque" (p. 102).

VI. "Truth and Augustine's Conversion Scene"¹⁴

Finally in 1988, almost as an afterthought to what he had been proposing, and following on the essay "Beyond Augustine's Conversion Scene", Ferrari adds to his arguments in his "Truth and Augustine's Conversion Scene".¹⁵ Up to this point, Ferrari seems to have pursued his research without paying much attention to the fact

¹⁴ Ibid.

that Augustine mentions truth and truthfulness repeatedly throughout the *Confessions*, and sometimes describes God (and Jesus) as Truth. What Ferrari also does not appreciate, given his apparent indifference to some of the early works, is that this particular way of referring to Christ is evident in the Cassiciacum dialogues. Ferrari mentions Augustine's *De mendacio* and *Contra Mendacium*, as if the former contained Augustine's first statements about truth, truthfulness and speaking the truth. So now, Ferrari informs us about Augustine's dedication to truth, and asserts that it is "even more pointedly and pertinently evident" in the *Confessions* (p. 10), where "truth (*veritas*) and its cognates occur just over three hundred sixty times" (p. 10). Truth, truthfulness, and truth-telling are hardly incidental to Augustine's concerns as a writer of the *Confessions*.

What is mind-boggling is that after such an obvious oversight Ferrari can claim his turn to this question as "a new approach to the much discussed topic of the truth of Augustine's conversion scene" because he is convinced that "an examination of the contexts of at least the more prominent of these references would be most germane to the subject of truth in the *Confessiones* and so to the mode of veracity of the conversion scene itself" (p. 10). A question immediately presents itself. Given Ferrari's unmistakably misleading reading of *Confessions* 10.3.3 on Augustine's hermeneutics of *caritas*, what difference could this "new" study make to establishing the "mode of veracity of the conversion scene", as Ferrari claims here?

In a page and half (pp. 11-12) of citations meant to show Augustine's understanding and use of the idea of truth in the *Confessions* we are greeted with a brief assessment of *Confessions* 10, which, Ferrari reminds us, contains the "largest cluster of references to truth" (p. 11). Ferrari claims that the "various aspects of Augustine's notion of truth in the *Confessiones* bespeak of an interiorized mystical mode of truth far removed from the empirically verifiable kind called for by the debate about the conversion scene" (p.11). And true to his posture throughout all these essays Ferrari adverts that "it follows then that he [Augustine] probably would have considered such a debate as not merely irrelevant, but probably morally culpable (p. 11)" citing *Confessions* 10.35.54-57 (p. 17 n. 36) as evidence of Augustine criticism of *curiositas*.

Not only are we to believe that Augustine "probably would have considered" the modern debate "irrelevant" he would think it

¹⁵ Leo C. FERRARI, "Truth and Augustine's Conversion Scene", *Collectanea Augustiniana* (New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 9-19.

"probably morally culpable" as an act of vain *curiositas*. Incidentally, it is this theme of human curiosity which Ferrari falls back on that Augustine addresses in *Confessions* 10.3.3, a passage Ferrari seems not to have appreciated for its relevance for so much of what is at stake here. The problems simply do not go away. And Ferrari must account for why Augustine would consider morally culpable such curiosity about the details of his life when he is the very one who provides the narrative in the *Confessions*? For good or ill, "there remains the undeniable fact that Augustine has presented us with the scene." And so Ferrari concedes that "it is to be explained then, how the mundane events of Augustine's life can be reconciled with the exalted notion of truth" that is claimed for him "without involving lying" (p. 12).

The only avenue left for Ferrari is to propose some kind of exalted notion of allegorical signification which can obviate the incredible difficulties posed for his theories by the evidence from Augustine's early works and the *Confessions*. Notice the confounding explanation entailed in the following: "indeed, following Romans 3:4, Augustine maintains in the closing pages of the *Confessiones* that God alone is the Truth, but every man is a liar. Finally, the Scriptures are true, since God is true and being Truth itself, has set forth those holy writings. It is fitting then, that Augustine should seek to ground his own conversion in those same Scriptures by the manner in which his conversion is a thinly disguised version of the famous conversion scene of Paul" (p. 12). Does Ferrari seriously believe that Augustine presents this contrast between God as truth and all human beings as liars as a way of legitimizing human falsehoods and the fabrication of his own conversion narrative?

Ferrari returns to *De mendacio*, conflating what Augustine says about lies that were told in scripture by people who were approved by God and the use of figurative language, which Augustine also defends. Ferrari claims that "among the extenuating considerations for such lying" Augustine mentions the use of language figuratively. And because of this usage, it is suggested that "in virtue of some hidden signification, they are not altogether lies". Ferrari goes on to say that "coming as it does, just before the writing of the *Confessiones*, that manner of signification offers a convenient starting point for the subject of the truth and figurative language in regard to Augustine's paulinizing of his conversion scene" (p. 12). This is a convenient starting point only because of the kinds of arguments Ferrari has proffered to explain Augustine's craft. To end, then, on the note that "Augustine's notion of truth in the *Confessiones* transcends empirical verifiability, and so too the whole question of the factuality or the

fictionality of the conversion scene" (p. 14) borders on the jejune.

In the preceding I have tried to show how ill-conceived and untenable Ferrari's arguments about Augustine's conversion scene have been. If nothing else, the industry Ferrari has brought to the task and the minimal results it has yielded should be a cautionary tale. Far from disenchanting Augustine's readers, Ferrari's conjectures suggest how nearly impossible it is to substantiate the claim that the scene has been fabricated.

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