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CHAPTER 8

How great a debtor: grace and providence in Augustine's Confessions

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By the time of writing the *Confessions* Augustine has no doubt of any kind that God is both gracious and providential. But there is no systematic account of either grace or providence in the work. We are shown the working of God's grace and providence largely by Augustine's comments on the narrative of his life, not so much by any extended argumentative passages such as we find on, say, time or the metaphysics of good and evil. Yet there is certainly an account of both grace and providence in the *Confessions*, at least in the sense that there are consistent themes and modes of developing those themes that Augustine can be relied on to express both in the autobiographical books and in the remainder of the work. My aim in this chapter is to set out those accounts as clearly as possible, without imposing later questions – and perhaps later conclusions that Augustine had not yet reached – on the material.

The chapter falls into two sections: I look at passages in both the autobiographical books (section 1) and the exegetical books (section 2) in which Augustine reveals his approach to grace or providence (or both), organize them as systematically as possible without imposing on the text a kind of comprehensiveness or “grand theory of everything” that arguably is not there, and in that way delineate the view of grace and providence at which Augustine had arrived by the time of writing the *Confessions*.

First, however, I need to say something – at least enough to get started on the project – about how I understand ‘grace’ and ‘providence’ in this chapter. By ‘grace’ I mean God's unmerited favor toward human beings. It is by grace, not by works, that we are saved, because

in our sinful state we do not and cannot merit salvation. It is by grace that we have even our “natural” gifts – a ready intelligence, a gift for language, an aptitude for music, an affectionate heart – for we have no call on God even for our existence, let alone for the good things that adorn our nature and are ready to come to fulfillment as they are nourished by teachers, parents, and virtuous friends. It is by grace that hard hearts are softened, wayward desires resisted, divided wills made harmonious, new and rightly ordered loves implanted in the human soul, and salutary impressions introduced into our thought.¹ In short, I take ‘grace’ broadly to mean God’s action in bestowing on his human creatures any good of body, soul, or circumstance that they do not deserve: which is to say, any good whatsoever.²

‘Providence,’ as I understand it here, is God’s exercise of his power to shape human lives for the realization of his own purposes. That God is no mere spectator, but an agent in the created world, is a claim of central importance to Augustine; Frederick Crosson (2003) has convincingly shown that the problem of how a timeless God can act in the temporal world animates the whole work. Providence includes grace but extends well beyond it. When God bestows a good thing in order to realize his purposes in a particular human life or in the course of history more broadly, he is acting both graciously and providentially. For that matter, when God causes suffering to someone in order to turn his heart toward repentance and the good, he is acting both graciously and providentially, though the graciousness of God’s act will not be easy to appreciate in the moment, or indeed at all if the sinner persists in remaining alienated from God. A punishment that does not have a salvific purpose – and we must acknowledge that there are such punishments in Augustine’s view, since the everlasting torments of hell fit this description – is providential but certainly not gracious.³

¹ For grace in the form of a motivating impression (*suggestio*) given by God, see Byers 2013, esp. 181–185.

² Drecoll (1999: 251) states that “the *Begriff gratia* does not appear at all for long stretches of the *Confessions*” and quotes Niebergall (1951: 196) as saying that “it is used far less often than one would have initially supposed.” By *Begriff* Drecoll (and Niebergall) must mean ‘term’ rather than ‘concept.’ The *term* (*Lemma*) appears in only 55 passages; in 7 of these it means “for the sake of” and in 21 it appears in the plural and means “thanks,” leaving only 27 passages in which it means “grace.” But for all that the *term* is surprisingly rare, the *concept* is pervasive, as Drecoll’s own 100-page discussion of grace in the *Confessions* (to which I am greatly indebted) makes very clear.

³ Though some might dispute this point: cf. C. S. Lewis’s poem “Divine Justice,” which begins “God in his mercy made / the fixed pains of hell. / That misery might be stayed.”

Augustine sounds the theme of grace early in the *Confessions*: in the first paragraph if we allow the half-quotation of James 4:6⁴ to count. “God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble,” the verse reads. Here Augustine makes use only of the first half – human beings “carry around the evidence that you resist the proud” – but if I’m right about how intertextuality works in the *Confessions*,⁵ the other half of the verse still sounds in the mind of the well-instructed reader. The echo of the assurance that God likewise gives grace to the humble is at least audible enough to introduce a kind of tension or discord from the very beginning. The most obvious feature of the human condition is perhaps its alienation from God. We are mortal; we are restless; we are “but a portion of your creation.”⁶ Yet if we can acknowledge our humble station, if we can acknowledge our need for God, our alienation and finitude are not the last word, for God gives grace to the humble: “You rouse [us] to take delight in praising you: for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it comes to rest in you.”

Augustine’s heart will remain restless for a substantial portion of the narrative, of course; he is not swiftly or easily roused to take delight in praising God. But the grace of God is present from the beginning, as Augustine takes care to emphasize:

⁴ James is quoting Proverbs 3:34 (as Augustine knew it in the VL, not as it appears in our modern translations); the verse is also quoted at 1 Peter 5:5. The context in which the quotation appears in James makes it likely that Augustine has James chiefly in mind, given the use he makes of the passage: “Or do you suppose it is in vain that the scripture says, ‘He yearns jealously over the spirit which he has made to dwell in us’? But he gives more grace; therefore it says, ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you men of double mind. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to dejection. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will exalt you” (James 4:5–10, RSV). In 1 Peter the verse is used to encourage humility on the part of his readers toward one another, rather than toward God; in Proverbs it is one of a list of disconnected maxims.

⁵ See Williams 2019: xvii–xxiv.

⁶ *conf.* 1.1.1. Translations throughout are my own, from Williams 2019. O’Donnell *ad loc.* argues that the *homo* who is described as a small portion of God’s creation is Augustine himself, rather than any given human being (*homo quidam*) or human beings in general. This seems unlikely, not least because it makes the appearance of the first-person plural in the next sentence – “you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it comes to rest in you” – inexplicable.

Yet even if it had been your will, O Lord, that I should not live past boyhood, I would have owed thanks to you, our God, most excellent and supremely good Creator and Governor of the universe. For even then I had being, I lived, and I had sensation; I looked after my own health and wholeness, a trace of that deeply hidden Oneness from which I had my being; by an inner sense I guarded the integrity of my outer senses; and in my small thoughts about small things I delighted in truth. I hated to be deceived, I had an excellent memory, I was well furnished with speech, I was touched by friendship. I avoided pain, humiliation, and ignorance. In such a living creature how astonishing, how worthy of praise, were all these things! But they were all gifts from my God. I did not give them to myself; they are good, and all of them together make me who I am. (*conf.* 1.20.31)

Augustine gives us no reason to suppose that God's grace is, to use later terminology, irresistible. God's ways with sinners are sometimes winsome, sometimes harsh, but never so forceful as to negate human freedom. Augustine could have closed his ears to the substance of Ambrose's teaching, could have resolved to see the name of Jesus, which "my tender heart had drunk . . . with my mother's milk" (*conf.* 3.4.8), as one of the childish things that a grown man must put away (1 Cor. 13:11).

That Augustine did ultimately submit to the divine wooing is not without explanation, of course. God had patiently prepared a well-disposed recipient of Ambrose's sermons, using both external circumstances and Augustine's own desires – including disordered desires – to mold Augustine into the kind of person who could benefit from Ambrose's preaching. God gave Augustine his native talent for language, which, largely for reasons of worldly ambition, he developed to such a high level of professional polish that he had become just the sort of person who could come to admire Ambrose's elegant speech. God had also prepared Augustine's heart by arranging the disappointing encounter with Faustus, which left Augustine hungry for rhetorical polish that did not paper over a fundamental lack of substance. One could point to any number of ways in which God rendered Augustine receptive, but none in which God overruled Augustine's own loves or judgments.

Although Augustine likes to remind us that "God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble,"⁷ the actual dynamics of grace in the *Confessions* are far more complex than that

⁷ He quotes or clearly alludes to the passage at *conf.* 1.1.1, 3.5.9, 4.3.5, 4.15.26, 7.9.13, and 10.36.59.

passage, taken by itself, would suggest. Though God sets himself against the proud, who set themselves against him, he often uses those who are filled with pride as instruments of grace. The most noteworthy example is the man “puffed up with the most monstrous arrogance” through whom Augustine obtained “certain books of the Platonists translated from Greek into Latin” (*conf.* 7.9.13). Augustine tells us nothing about why this fellow took the trouble to supply him with the books that would prove so consequential – it does not matter to the divine economy of grace – but he does tell us what God’s intentions were: “it was your will to show me how you resist the proud but give grace to the humble” (*conf.* 7.9.13).

As I have argued at greater length elsewhere,⁸ these words prefacing the story of his encounter with the books of the Platonists should set us up to look for a story of failure, not a story of success. Yes, he learns a great deal from the Platonists, although Augustine recounts those truths exclusively in the language of Scripture. More important still, the books of the Platonists set him on a path to see those truths within himself, where alone truth can be discerned, made visible (as he has by now come to think) by the coeternal Word: “Admonished by these books to return to myself, I entered into my inmost self with you as my guide; and I was able to do this because you had become my helper” (*conf.* 7.10.16).⁹

This episode highlights the further point that the proud can be not only instruments of grace, but recipients of grace. Indeed, they must be: it is an obvious conceptual point that anyone who turns from pride to humility does so precisely through God’s grace. The Augustine who encounters the books of the Platonists to his great intellectual profit is not yet humble: far from it. Small wonder that God resists him – but the divine resistance is itself a kind of grace.

⁸ See Williams 2002, from which I have borrowed some language here. Peter King (2014b) reads the Milan ascent rather differently, but in one respect, at least, I think our differences are merely verbal. King regards the Milan ascent as a success; I regard it as a failure. But the success King identifies is a *philosophical* success, and I don’t dispute that Augustine’s reflections were a success in those terms. The failure of which I am speaking – and which Augustine as author sets us up to look for – is a volitional failure. Augustine learns a great deal, and indeed sees the highest truth without room for doubt; but his loves are not reoriented.

⁹ Here I am in agreement with Peter King’s assessment of the anti-Plotinian character of the Milan ascent: “Augustine tells us that God joined him within, to be Augustine’s guide and helper (*dux* and *adiutor* respectively). A moment’s reflection should show us how extraordinary this is: Imagine the Form of the Beautiful Itself joining Plato in the Ascent of Love, helping him along – or, worse yet, the One as Plotinus’s helpful assistant! But Augustine’s God is there for Augustine” (King 2014b: 23).

“God gives grace to the proud” is not something Augustine cares to say directly, but he illustrates this aspect of the dynamics of grace again and again:

For your Word, the eternal Truth, greatly exalted above the highest parts of your creation, lifts up to himself those who are his subjects; but in the lowest parts he has built for himself a humble home from our very dust, through which he casts down those who need to be subject to him and draws them to himself. He heals their swollen pride and nourishes their love, so that their self-reliance will not take them even further from him, but instead they will become weaker as they see before their steps the weakness that his Godhead has assumed by sharing in the garments of our flesh, and in their weariness cast themselves upon him, so that he might arise and lift them up. (*conf.* 7.18.24)

It is grace that breaks down the pride that God resists, grace that instils the humility that God crowns with further grace.

Much of what Augustine says about grace, both in the *Confessions* and (especially) elsewhere, suggests a clear identification of the “causal joint” between divine and human action. God contributes whatever is good; human beings contribute whatever is deficient. But matters are much more complicated than that easy statement of the division of labor suggests. We gain a clearer understanding, I think, if we attend to Austin Farrer’s conception of dual agency. As Farrer says,

God makes his creatures make themselves, and they must truly make themselves by their own principle of action. We are not to conceive that God throws such a responsibility on them by a special decree of his will, or that he might have ordained otherwise. It is rather that their action is their existence, and if they did not act of themselves, they would not exist in themselves – in fact, God would have failed after all to create them.¹⁰

The assigning of “credit” is not the issue here; what matters is that the divine will operates by enabling human beings to align their own wills with God.

Farrer’s conception of dual agency admittedly does not align perfectly with Augustine’s approach to grace and providence in the *Confessions*, and one might think that, if applied to Augustine, it would implicate him in something too close to Pelagianism even for the Augustine of the 390s, let alone the Augustine of the 420s. But let’s not dismiss Farrer too

¹⁰ Farrer 1964: 124. I take the expression “causal joint” from Farrer 1988: 65–66.

quickly here. If Augustine is purely plastic in the divine hands – if he actually contributes nothing but a drain on the divine goodness, which otherwise builds up everything in Augustine worth having – then Augustine is not “capable of response to God in any morally or spiritually meaningful sense”; all human beings, it will turn out, “are merely passive puppets of a cosmic puppeteer.”¹¹ And the *Confessions* repeatedly resists any reduction of what certainly looks like creaturely action to mere instrumentality, to nothing more than a vehicle for divine agency.

Part of the reason for this resistance is that much of the *Confessions* is an autobiographical narrative, one that would make no sense if Augustine’s *I* vanished entirely into the divine *Thou*.¹² Farrer writes, “We know that the action of a man can be the action of God in him; our religious existence is an experimenting with this relation” (Farrer 1988: 66). The story of Augustine’s life is a story of how Augustine’s actions are the actions of God in Augustine, without thereby ceasing to be Augustine’s own actions.

Farrer thinks this picture does away with any need for a special concept of grace (Farrer 1988: 66–67). Such eliminativism would, I think, be a step too far; but Farrer’s ideas offer a useful corrective to the picture of Augustine on grace that makes the divine-human relationship look like a high-minded religious version of the disclaimer found in a thousand acknowledgment sections (“I am grateful to x, y, and z for their helpful comments; any errors that remain are my own”). They also provide a broader context in which to understand the often-noticed fact that whenever God acts providentially in Augustine’s life, some natural influence is always at work alongside the supernatural. Why does Augustine leave Carthage for Rome? Because he wanted better students, and because God was working toward his salvation (*conf.* 5.8.14). Why does he leave Rome for Milan? Again because he wanted better students, and because God was pulling him away from the Manichees and into the salutary influence of

¹¹ J. Gerald Janzen (2012: 130), commenting on the passage I just quoted from Farrer. If the reading of Augustine I am developing under Farrer’s influence implicates Augustine in Pelagianism (though I don’t think it does), so be it: I stand by my observation that “as a doctrinal or intellectual matter . . . everyone has to have a little Pelagianism somewhere; otherwise, the only difference between those who act rightly and those who do not turns out to be God’s arbitrary bestowal of grace on some and withholding of grace from others” (Williams 2019: x).

¹² For the centrality of the second-personal *I-Thou* relationship in the *Confessions*, see Andrew Pinsent, chapter 9 in this volume.

Ambrose (*conf.* 5.13.23). In these and so many other instances, the supernatural explanation does not supplant the natural explanation. Nor do the natural and supernatural simply sit side by side in a kind of pre-established harmony. In every case, God is making Augustine make himself.

2 GRACE IN THE EXEGETICAL BOOKS

Augustine's exegesis of Gen. 1:1–2:3 should be regarded as (among many other things) an examination of grace and providence in their cosmic dimensions, a global narrative that enlarges upon the personal narrative of the first ten books and provides a context in which that particular story – that intersection, really, of a number of personal stories – can be understood.¹³ At the beginning of Book 11 Augustine returns to the words with which he began the work, looking back upon the grace that has brought him safe thus far:

I am kindling my affections, and the affections of those who are reading these things, so that we will all say "Great is the Lord and highly to be praised." . . . To you we lay open our affections, confessing to you our own miseries and your mercies toward us so that you might make us wholly free – for you have begun to free us; so that we might be poor in spirit, meek, mourning, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, and peacemakers. Truly, then, I have told you these many things, so far as I had the power and the will to tell them, because you first willed that I confess to you, O Lord my God, for you are good, because your mercy endures for ever. (*conf.* 11.2.1)

He then appeals for further grace to continue his enterprise of confession:

O Lord my God, give heed to my prayer, and by your mercy hearken to my desire, for it does not burn for myself alone but is eager to be of use in brotherly love. . . . Let me offer to you the service of my thought and my tongue; grant what I would offer to you. For I am destitute and poor; you are generous to all who call upon you. . . . Grant what I love

¹³ The old critical judgment that Books 11–13 represent a sprawling appendix arbitrarily tacked on to an autobiography with which they do not really fit seems to have fallen out of fashion. It is now generally recognized that the *Confessions* is a well-constructed literary whole; the exegetical books fit into that whole in several identifiable ways. See my own account (Williams 2019: xi–xvii), which largely follows Crosson 2003 and O'Donnell 1992. For complementary accounts, see Conybeare 2016: 22–27 and Kotzé 2020a. Chapters 1 and 7 in this volume also take up issues of the structure and unity of the work.

– for I do love it, and it is you who have granted me this gift. (*conf.* 11.2.3)¹⁴

The theme of grace is thus prominent at the beginning of Augustine’s exegesis, making a clear connection (beyond the mere echo of the work’s opening words, revealing though that is) between two narratives, one personal and the other cosmic.

As he begins his exegesis, Augustine pleads specifically for what we might call *epistemic* grace: grace to understand. Augustine prays, “As you empowered your servant [Moses] to say these things” – the “true things” he said about creation – “empower me to understand them” (*conf.* 11.3.5). He needs divine help to understand how God can teach things that are (to the prophets, though not to God) future:

The way in which you do this is far beyond my power of vision; it is too much for me. In my own strength I cannot attain to it. But in the strength that comes from you, sweet Light of my hidden eyes, I will be able to attain to it, when you have granted me your help. (*conf.* 11.19.25)

The mystery of how we measure times as they pass, given that only the durationless present exists and measurements of time are always in terms of some duration, can likewise be penetrated only with divine help: “let me break through to these things until they begin to shine by the light of your mercy, O Lord” (*conf.* 11.22.28).

Once the mystery of time has been confronted and Augustine turns in Book 12 to the multiplicity of possible interpretations of “In the beginning God created heaven and earth,” the theme of grace recedes almost entirely from view.¹⁵ But in Book 13, devoted to the narrative of creation as allegory for the divine work of forming and re-forming the human soul, both grace and providence figure prominently. Augustine sounds the theme of personal providence first, before he turns to cosmic providence:

¹⁴ There is a near-repetition of the last sentence later in Book 11: “Grant what I love – for I do love it, and even that love is your gift” (*conf.* 11.22.28). The thought is given an even pithier statement in Book 12: “you rouse me to knock and open the door to my knocking” (*conf.* 12.12.15).

¹⁵ One might perhaps take Augustine’s language about what Truth says to him in his inward ear (*conf.* 12.11.11 [*bis*], 11.12, 15.18 [*bis*], 29.44) as at least obliquely attributing his progress in understanding to divine grace. Some of the language of love and gratitude that Augustine employs in Book 12 gives some weight to that interpretation, but to me the overwhelming sense is that Augustine takes himself to have reached conclusions accessible to any competent thinker by virtue of the ordinary (rather than gracious) divine illumination that makes possible any understanding whatsoever.

I call upon you, my God, my mercy, who made me and did not forget me when I forgot you. I call you into my soul, which you are making ready to receive you through the longing that you have inspired in it. . . . Even before I called upon you, you went before me and urged me on by a chorus of voices of all sorts, so that I might hear you from afar and turn to you and call upon you who call upon me . . . you have gone before me in every good deed of mine, so that you might repay the works of your own hands, the hands by which you made me. (*conf.* 13.1.1)

The whole of the creation narrative, both in its literal and in its allegorical interpretation, is intelligible to Augustine (and, through Augustine, to us) only because he knows what it means for God to speak first into chaos and darkness and to bring it to order and light. To adapt a quip that Mark Twain is supposed to have made (but did not), the history of grace does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme.

The first rhyme comes as soon as Augustine turns to the cosmic narrative. In the first paragraph he observes, “before I was, you were; I was nothing at all, nothing even to which you could grant being. And yet here I am: your goodness went before me, and by it I am everything you have made me, everything from which you have made me. You had no need of me” (*conf.* 13.1.1). In the second paragraph he applies the same observation to the whole of creation:

Truly your creation stands firm because of your abundant goodness: for in your goodness you did not want this good thing to fail to exist, this good thing that could be of no use to you, and was not from you and equal to you, but could nevertheless be made by you. What claim on you did heaven and earth have, which you made in the beginning? (*conf.* 13.2.2)

No claim at all, of course, and Augustine drives the point home by asking the question again and again: “what claim did they have on you that they should exist?” (*conf.* 13.2.2) “What claim did bodily matter have on you, even to be invisible and unorganized?” (*conf.* 13.2.3) “Or what claim did the spiritual creation in its incipient state have on you, even to waver in a darkness like the abyss, and unlike you?” (*conf.* 13.2.3)

In my introduction to this paper I defined grace as God’s unmerited favor toward human beings, for that is (roughly) how Christian theologians typically think of grace, especially when considering the relations among grace, free will, merit, and salvation. By that definition, God’s calling into being the whole nonhuman creation and bestowing on it its various goodnesses and beauties does not count as grace: but the gratuitousness of creation and

ongoing formation is echoed, and expanded, in the grace that God gives us in our bare existence, in our gifts of nature, and (uniquely) in our turning toward the perfection that is found in, and is, God alone.

Or perhaps it would better to say that God's calling into being the nonhuman creation that has no claim on him does not count as grace *for the nonhuman creation itself*. For Augustine reminds us repeatedly that God speaks to us through the rest of creation. Scholars like to talk about Augustine's intellectual ascents, and it is importantly true that Augustine reasons from below to above in coming to know God. Less discussed, however, is that the movement from low to high is preceded by a movement from outside to inside. We do not find God in our memory, even in our intellectual memory, where we find logical, mathematical, and moral truths: "you were not already in my memory before I learned you" (*conf.* 10.26.37). We find God because his creation speaks to us of him: "Your works praise you that we may love you, and we love you that your works may praise you" (*conf.* 13.33.48).

A second rhyme involves God's providential protection, the guardrails that he places, first around Augustine in the autobiographical books, and then around all of humanity in the exegetical books. After recounting his theft of the pears, Augustine cries out to God:

I owe it to your grace and to your mercy that you have melted my sins like ice. To your grace I owe also whatever evil things I did not do: for what was I not capable of doing, I who loved even crime for no reason at all? And I acknowledge that I have been forgiven for all these things, both those I did of my own accord and those I refrained from doing because you were guiding me. (*conf.* 2.7.15)

That God's grace prevented Augustine from going even further astray than he did is a recurrent theme in the autobiographical books, returning at the cosmic level in the exegetical books.

Augustine argues, for example, that the gathering of the waters on the third day of creation allegorically signifies God's providential limitations on evildoers and their wayward desires:

Who gathered into one society those who do bitter deeds? They all have the same end, temporal and earthly happiness; whatever they do, they do for the sake of that end, though they waver amidst a countless variety of anxious cares. Was it not you, O Lord, who commanded the waters to be gathered together into one place and the dry ground, thirsting for you, to appear? For even the sea is yours, and you made it, and your hands molded the dry land. It is not the bitterness of wills, but rather the gathering of the waters, that is called the sea. For you restrain even the evil desires of souls; you set the

limits beyond which the waters cannot go, so that their waves may break upon themselves. (*conf.* 13.17.20)

God's providence not only restrains evil wills but segregates them from souls that "have a different end, souls that thirst for you and appear before you" (*conf.* 13.17.21).

The instruments of grace explored in the exegetical books also correspond to those Augustine recounted in the autobiographical books: a third rhyme. We can begin with the catalogue of means of grace given obliquely in *conf.* 13.23.34: "the solemn celebration of the sacraments of initiation for those whom your mercy seeks out in many waters . . . the rite in which the Fish drawn out of the deep is offered and devout earth feeds upon it . . . [and] the signs and sounds of words subject to the authority of your book." These are baptism, the Eucharist, and Scripture, respectively; and we can add a fourth, the Church (*conf.* 13.23.33).

In Augustine's own life, baptism was postponed twice – in Book 1 and Book 5 – and finally embraced – in Book 9.¹⁶ Baptism was momentous, the "happy ending" of his long and winding search for God; once he and his friends had been baptized, "all anxiety over our past life vanished" (*conf.* 9.6.14). As Drecoll observes, there are several passages in the narrative books in which *gratia* practically *means* baptism.¹⁷ In the cosmic narrative, baptism is the means by which God claims people for himself: "your sacraments, O God, crept through the works of your saints . . . to mark the peoples with your Name by plunging them in the waters of your baptism" (*conf.* 13.20.26).

The case of baptism brings me to the fourth and final way in which the cosmic narrative of grace rhymes with Augustine's personal narrative. In both narratives the recipients of grace – first Augustine, then all his fellow saints throughout the history of the Church – are caught in between the now and the not yet. The sabbath rest for which they long is not yet attained. The words I deliberately elided in my last quotation from the *Confessions* are very telling in this

¹⁶ For an illuminating discussion of the structural and theological significance of baptism and Eucharist in the *Confessions*, see Elizabeth Klein, chapter 7 in this volume. I owe the thought of baptism as "happy ending" to her.

¹⁷ See Drecoll 1999: 252 for a complete list and discussion. Here are just two examples: Simplicianus was Ambrose's "father . . . in receiving grace" (that is, he baptized him: *conf.* 8.2.3), and Adeodatus was "of the same age as we were in your grace" (that is, he was baptized at the same time: *conf.* 9.6.14).

respect: “in the midst of the waves of temptation in this life” (*conf.* 13.20.26). The saints are marked with God’s Name, but they are not thereby spared from temptation. They are segregated from souls who do not share their end, but those souls are still alongside them in their daily lives, in their communities, even in worship – for the Church itself is a thoroughly mixed body, and even “your spiritual ones . . . who judge spiritually . . . do not know who will one day come into the sweetness of your grace and who will remain in the endless bitterness of impiety” (*conf.* 13.23.33).

Augustine’s own life likewise illustrates the uneasy truth that the work of grace has decisively begun, but it has not been decisively completed. Even if all anxiety about his past life vanished at his baptism, there remains anxiety about his present and future life, as we learn at some length in Book 10. God has freed Augustine from his disordered, compulsive sexuality, at least in his waking life; traces remain to disturb him in his sleep, and God could free Augustine from those, though he has not yet done so (*conf.* 10.30.42). One can give up sex once and for all, but one can’t do the same with food and drink, so temptations to intemperance and overindulgence will always be present (*conf.* 10.31.47). Augustine also remains prone to distraction and wandering thoughts (*conf.* 10.35.47).

Above all, he has never ceased to be troubled by *ambitio saeculi*, worldly ambition. He writes:

Can it ever, over the course of my whole life, cease to trouble me? I mean the desire to be feared and loved by other people, for no other reason than that it brings a joy that is no true joy. It is a miserable life and revolting ostentation, the foremost reason that we fail to love you and to fear you with a holy fear; and so you resist the proud and give grace to the humble. . . . The enemy of our true happiness aggressively sets traps for those of us who must be loved and feared by others for the sake of our duties in human society, scattering cries of “Well done! Well done, indeed!” everywhere we turn, so that when we eagerly receive such acclaim we are captured without even realizing it; we cease to find our joy in your truth but find it instead in human deceit. We enjoy being loved and feared, not on account of you, but instead of you. (*conf.* 10.36.59)

The only remedy is delighting in God’s gifts of grace, not in our own possession of those gifts or in anyone else’s praise for them; and God gives further grace to strengthen us to take the right kind of delight. But the temptation is unrelenting: “We are tested by these temptations every day, O Lord; we are endlessly tempted” (*conf.* 10.37.60).

So baptism inaugurates the life of grace but does not free us from temptation. The Church is God's agent for administering the sacraments, teaching divine truth, and bringing forth the fruit of works of mercy; but it remains a mixed body, its genuine members at present known only to God, to be revealed to all eschatologically. Scripture likewise, though unquestionably a means of grace, is a challenge to interpret.¹⁸ It is also an interim measure: the angels do not need it now, and some day neither will we. So of the four means of grace explored in Book 13, only the Eucharist remains as potentially unproblematic or unequivocal. Not that the Eucharist will remain in the life of the world to come, of course, but that it is unambiguously what it presents itself as being: a feeding on Christ, by which we become what we eat.

Certainly Augustine professes no such ambiguity about the Eucharist as he does about baptism (or, perhaps more precisely, about the life of the baptized), the Church, and Scripture. "I think upon the price that has been paid for me, and I eat it and drink it and give it away," he says with joy, and his role as dispenser of the Sacrament is unquestionably precious to him. But even here he is caught in between the now and the not yet. He continues, "I long to have my fill of it among those who eat and are satisfied," an indication that the Eucharist, though genuinely a foretaste of the heavenly banquet, is still just that: a foretaste.

¹⁸ The challenges of reading Scripture are well-explored by Blake D. Dutton in chapter 6 of this volume, so I needn't say anything more about them here.

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