

Augustine's Eucharistic Spirituality

An Integral Approach towards Salvation

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Augustine's eucharistic spirituality: a historical and systematic investigation

All too long, until the mid of the 20th century, the Augustinian research was focused on the debate whether there is a realistic or a symbolic understanding of the eucharistic mystery in Augustine's thinking. Few attention was paid to the fact that Augustine's intention is not a dogmatic, but a mystagogical one. The central question of my research on Augustine's eucharistic spirituality is: how does the concept of eucharistic spirituality appear in Augustine's thinking? Even though Augustine (354-430) is a very famous Christian author, whose influence on the occidental theology can hardly be overestimated, no systematic investigation on his eucharistic spirituality has been undertaken until now. This is somehow surprising since the topic of the Eucharist appears quite often in Augustine's writings, especially in his sermons and exegetical works, which have mostly a pastoral intention. This pastoral intention is combined with a profoundly spiritual perspective. Another question arises at the same time, however situated on a more general level: is it not a little bit strange to speak about eucharistic spirituality in this context, long time before the term 'spirituality' existed in our common use? The short answer to this question is: if we talk about 'eucharistic spirituality', we talk about the idea rather than the term in a literal sense. Yet, even the idea of the 'eucharistic spirituality' has to be questioned and defined.

A renewed approach towards eucharistic spirituality

Eucharistic spirituality has very often been, and still is associated with the veneration of the Body of Christ, presented to the faithful in the monstrance on the altar. The eucharistic veneration is indeed a pious exercise that gained in importance since the Middle Ages and that is still quite alive in Catholic communities. However, Augustine as one of the most important Christian writers and thinkers whose cultural environment is the Roman Empire of the Late Antiquity shows us a different approach: to him, the Eucharist has its place in the heart of the Church as the Body of Christ and in the faithful's heart. The liturgical celebration has a significance for everyday life and the striving for holiness. This approach is quite essential and in accordance with the renewal of

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the liturgical spirituality formulated and promoted by the early and mid-20th century Liturgical Movement. Seen from this perspective, one could say that Augustine is a warrantor for a liturgical (eucharistic) spirituality that is up to date! But what does the term ‘spirituality’ mean; how is it used in this context?

Before investigating thoroughly the Augustinian writings, ‘spirituality’ as well as ‘eucharistic spirituality’ have to be defined (chapter 1 of the PHD thesis). Since the term ‘spirituality’ is currently used in very different, religious as well as non-specifically religious but secular ways, the need of speaking of a specific ‘Christian spirituality’ in the proper sense of the term is necessary. Going back to the roots, the Latin word *spiritualis* as to be found in the New Testament (for example “*homo spiritualis*” in 1 *Corinthians* 2,15) and in Early Church writings, signifies the Christian life under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. On that basis, ‘eucharistic spirituality’ can be understood as the Christians’ spiritual life related to the Eucharist, that means to the Eucharistic celebration and the reception of the Body and Blood of Christ.

Beyond that, any talk about spirituality has to take into consideration the anthropological dimension related to the concept. What kind of anthropological dimension is predominant in Augustine’s (eucharistic) spirituality? The second chapter of the dissertation wants to give an answer to this question. As we know, Augustine is famous for his well thought out anthropology situated in between the Platonic thinking and the influence of Saint Paul’s writings (not to mention the influence his youthful openness for the Manichean sect and its dualistic view on the human being had on his anthropology; an issue that is controversially discussed). The human desire for God, as the deepest spiritual desire inscribed in the human heart, is for him the most existential desire. The direction of this desire indicates the way to inner fulfillment whereas all the desires for materialistic things cannot lead to the same goal. True desire for inner fulfillment is to be found interiorly, which, according to Augustine, is equal to the dwelling place of God’s presence in the human heart or soul. This divine presence in the Holy Spirit goes far beyond the human senses. False desires, on the contrary, are rather situated in the exterior parts of the human being, related to the human senses. According to Augustine, there are many factors that keep human persons away from becoming aware of their deepest inner desire, and by that they are kept away from reaching the goal they are made for: the final fulfillment in God. As Augustine knew from his own experience, an inner struggle is going on between the use (*uti*) of the things of this world, and the true joy that comes from the enjoyment of the spiritual things (*frui*).

Participation in the spiritual things

Christ as the Word of God brings the true fulfillment to humankind, and individually to each human being. He does so by erasing original sin engraved in

the human soul, and by letting participate the human person in the divine life: in love, faith and hope, in wisdom, truth and justice. In order to reach that goal, human persons need to become aware of their own limitations and sinfulness, and have to accept in faith the redemption in Christ. How does that happen? The first step is let to God's initiative: God himself acts by his grace and attracts the human soul so that the human person can recognize their own need for redemption, that means their own desire for Christ who is the Way (*uia*) to the eternal live in God. The personal relation between God and humankind in Christ is the bridge leading to God. And this personal relation is finally the essence of a Christian's spiritual life. The starting point of this spiritual life takes place by faith and baptism, which Augustine understands as the mysterious and effective sign of Christ's redemption, so that he calls baptism the "*sacramentum fidei*", the sacrament of faith. But even after baptism, the wounds of original sin keep the human soul inclined towards sin. The spiritual struggle is a life-long process a Christian has to fight. The force for this fight comes from Christ and happens by will strengthened by grace. Force means virtue: a virtue is a power that acts against the human tendency towards sin and enables the human being to participate in the divine life in a spiritual way. How does this participation take place? Once affected by original sin, the human soul is much too weak to receive the divine life spiritually, so that already for Adam and Eve signs were necessary in order to communicate. Each sound and each word, as part of a language, are a sign. However, different signs exist: there are signs with a salutary (or even salvific) significance; they are called '*sacramenta*'. In order to exemplify all these considerations and to specify them on the context of the eucharistic spirituality, the third chapter of the dissertation offers an analysis of the *Tractates on the Gospel according to John* 25-27. These texts serve as a reference for the description of Augustine's thinking about the Eucharist and the Word of God as Bread of Life (compare *John* 6). 'Bread of Life' is a sign, as an image or symbol, for Christ by which Christ is represented: Christ as the Bread of Life nourishes the human soul and strengthens the human being in its struggle for a virtuous life. So the Eucharist is not only a 'nourishment for the soul', but also a 'remedy' for the healing of the wounds that keep the faithful tended towards sin, even after having received baptism. Fortification in virtue as well as sanctification by healing the soul are taking place by the reception of the Eucharist. The image of 'Bread of Life', and partially also the Eucharist as a 'remedy' (*medicina*) play a decisive role in these referential texts. Different forms of Christ's self-manifestation to the faithful exist: as Jesus nourished the faithful by his spoken and preached words as he walked around through Galilee, he nourishes and heals the further generations by the Word of Scripture as well as by the Eucharist which are themselves salutary (if not even salvific) signs of Christ's presence (*sacramenta*). In the liturgy a real encounter with Christ takes place; the spiritual life is refreshed and strengthened. The faithful who, by love, faith, hope and humility, is open for Christ's presence, can participate by the signs (*sacramenta*) of Christ's Word and the Eucharist in the divine life. However, as

the bodily hunger comes back after a while, so does the spiritual hunger for Christ: Christians need to refresh themselves spiritually at the spiritual fountain which is Christ himself, as he manifests himself in his Word and the Eucharist. By that, the spiritual desire is satisfied, even though it can find its complete fulfillment only in eternal life.

Different dimensions of the Eucharist and their impact on the spiritual life

The most essential *sacramenta* of the Church are baptism, as the *sacramentum fidei*, and the Eucharist, as the *sacramentum caritatis*, the sacrament of charity, which is also the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, the *sacramentum corporis et sanguinis Christi*. For Augustine, the Eucharist is at the heart of the Church as a communion grounded on and connected by faith, hope and love. By the Eucharist, the faithful receive the charity that allows them to live a charitable life, firstly related to Christ who, as the head of the Church allows them to participate in the divine life, but not without connection of each member of the Church with the rest of the Christian community, since Christ and all the members form one whole body, the Church, as Saint Paul points it out (compare 1 *Corinthians* 12). One can say that the Eucharist has truly a universal, if not even cosmological dimension in Augustine's thinking: not only is there a connection to the living members of Christ's Body, the Church, but there is a close relatedness to the deceased as well. The eucharistic prayer is the central part of the celebration where not only the Word and the elements (bread and wine) join in order to build the sacrament (compare *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 80,1), but in this prayer, the community also prays for the deceased, as they are part of the body of Christ, the Church. The faithful pray for those who died before, but they ask for the prayer of those who have come already to the eternal fulfilment in their lives, that means the saints which are mostly martyrs who died for their faith. The martyrs are asked for their intercession in favor of those who are still alive and struggling on their way to holiness. Augustine points out the link between martyrdom and Eucharist: the martyrs were strengthened in their struggle in faith because they have received the Eucharist in a proper way. The charity they got by the Eucharist helped them to overcome the pain from which they had to suffer on earth. That means that the reception of the Eucharist is for Augustine not a one-way-track: each faithful who participates in the eucharistic celebration and who receives the Eucharist has to live out what he has received, that means the charity coming from Christ. This is the deepest meaning of the well-known formulation Augustine uses in an Easter sermon: "Be what you can see, and receive what you are" (Sermon 272). By that, Augustine explains to the freshly baptised how to live a Christian life that is related to Christ and his Church. That means that Augustine's eucharistic spirituality has a fundamentally social dimension, even far beyond the ecclesial context: feeding the poor, welcoming the foreigners... each act of true solidarity and charity is,

if united to the will of God, a 'true sacrifice' that the Christian can offer to God. This true sacrifice is closely related to the Eucharist in its sacrificial dimension which refers to Christ's self-offering to the Father; it is a self-offering in which the faithful can join during the eucharistic celebration; it is a self-offering that has to be lived out in every day's life. This insight is deepened in the fourth part of the dissertation. It is in the tenth book of the famous Augustinian work *The City of God* (*De civitate dei* 10,6) where we find an explanation of Augustine's understanding of the 'true sacrifice'. Since pagane sacrificial offerings were still quite in use in Augustine's cultural context, Augustine emphasizes the Christian understanding of sacrifice by pointing out that the one and only sacrifice with a salvific dimension is Christ's sacrifice on the cross. All the materialistic pagane sacrifices are far from having the same redemptive effect. From this one and true sacrifice, the Christian sacrifice as a self-offering with Christ is derived. The Christian sacrifice takes place interiorly and it reveals as exterior only in so far as it leads to the works of mercy, motivated by Christian charity. The Eucharist is a participation in that one and only sacrifice, Christ's self-offering to the Father in love, and all the strength for a life based on charity is related to this sacrifice.

The corporal expressions of spirituality

What is the spiritual dimension of the bodily participation in the celebration, based on Augustine's writings? After having clarified what the eucharistic spirituality means, as a concept with important implications on the Christian life, the attention is drawn to the fact that, since the human being consists of body and soul, the body as well plays an important role in Christian spirituality, and so does it in Augustine's eucharistic spirituality. Against all kinds of dualistic criticism, there is an important place Augustine gives to the bodily expressions that are expressions of mental attitudes and inner dispositions, but not only that: the bodily performance itself leads to spiritual attitudes, such as the sign of the cross. By making that sign on the head front, one becomes aware of its significance: Christ crucified and resurrected. Even including the whole body, the prostration in front of the altar not only signifies humility, but the performance itself is humiliating and manifests one's willingness to receive God's help and grace. Or let us look into the question how the corporal orientation took place within the eucharistic celebration after the proclamation of the Word. A whole, and sometimes politically colored debate about the Augustinian expression "*conuersi ad dominum*" ("Let us turn to the Lord") as we find it at the end of several of his sermons, has spread within the last twenty years. Some contemporary scholars argue that the whole assembly changed its place and orientation towards the altar; others deny this interpretation. Whatever might be the truth about Augustine's intention, there is a lot of place for further speculation. What we dare say is that by expressing these words at the end of his sermon, Augustine encouraged the faithful to turn interiorly to the Lord, and this again might

have been accompanied by a corporal gesture. Beyond that, it is important to say that many of the corporal gestures are not merely reduced to the context of the Eucharist, but could have had their place in other liturgical celebrations (morning and evening prayer) as well as in private prayer.

Was there a daily mass in Late Antiquity?

Within the final part of the dissertation, in chapter five, another more practical aspect is discussed: was there a practice of daily mass? Once again, we barely have hard facts that enable us to answer these questions. There are some small hints to a daily celebration of mass, when Augustine talks about the Eucharist as a “daily bread”. At the same time we have to ask the question who might have been able to participate, if not the small community of monks in which Augustine lived also as a bishop, celebrating their office in the episcopal church? Anyhow, we have to state the fact that Augustine, even though he stresses the importance of the meditation of the Word, which is for him also a “daily bread”, the liturgical celebrations, the morning and evening prayer, maybe in combination with the Eucharist, were of spiritual importance to himself. So he transmitted his conviction to the faithful so that they would follow his example.

Augustine: a holistic participation in the Eucharist

Far from being a theoretical description or a dogmatic approach on Christ’s eucharistic presence – a discussion that will appear only from the early Middle Ages onwards –, the concept of eucharistic spirituality as to be found in Augustine, is of a significant importance for us today. We can learn from him in our own pastoral approach by reading his writings. Augustine is very focused on the pastoral transmission of the eucharistic mystery, regularly circumscribed and only explained to the faithful after baptism, for reasons of the Late Antiquity’s arcane discipline. Although a profound thinker with a huge philosophical background, Augustine is nevertheless attentive to the faithful’s daily life experience. It might be quite surprising that Augustine includes all kind of ritual aspects into his meditations on the Eucharist. This refutes anyone who judges, without knowing the author, Augustine to be a mere dualistic thinker. Even though he might have a dualistic view at some points, as was quite in common in Late Antiquity culture, he pays much attention to the ritual expressions in prayer and in the liturgy. For that, and not only for that reason, Augustine’s eucharistic spirituality can be quite inspiring for our days, as we also have to find a way to make liturgy again understandable and meaningful. Not just the spoken words, but also our corporal gestures are a way to express ourselves in the liturgy. The spoken word, the interior prayer and the corporal gestures are part of our spiritual lives and can unite us to Christ.

