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Making the Theory Fit the Practice: Augustine and Anselm on Prayer

(1) Augustine

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At the editor's suggestion, Dr Evans has agreed to the publication of this article in two parts. The second and longer part will follow in the January 1992 issue.

I WANT to take two intellectually and spiritually outstanding medieval figures, perhaps the most outstanding of more than a millenium. If there are saints, they were undoubtedly saints. In very different circumstances both found that the theory on which they based their devotional life — or at least on which they *thought* they based it — was no easier to live up to when tested than any of the rest of us find it. In other words both found the theory severely tested in practice.

In Book IX of his *Confessions*, Augustine describes the mystical experience he shared with his mother at Ostia, where he and his companions were resting before they embarked for Africa. The episode occurred at an obvious turning point in Augustine's life. After his conversion he and his friends had retired for a time to Cassiciacum, where they had lived in the 'philosophical retirement' Augustine had always coveted, and spent their time in conversation about such subjects as order in the universe and the nature of eternal bliss. When they felt themselves ready, Augustine, his friend Alypius and his natural son Adeodatus, returned to Milan, where they were baptised (IX.vi.14). Now they were to go back to the region of North Africa from which Augustine had come, to live a monastic life there, as he proposed. He was, in other words, now embarking upon the Christian life for which he had hitherto been preparing. He describes the mood of serenity and joyfulness in which he and his mother stood side by side, leaning over the window-sill which overlooked the courtyard of the house where they were staying (IX.x.23). It was a moment for taking stock, for consciously putting the past behind one and looking forward (Philippians 3:13).

Several aspects of this famous moment of mystical experience are peculiarly its own, and I want to try to set them in context here. It was shared. It took place in the course of conversation. It is related to us by an Augustine who was to lose his mother within days of the event, entirely without warning, of a fever of which she showed no signs when they had their talk. The experience is therefore coloured for ever for him, and for his readers, by subsequent events.

As to the conversation: Augustine says that his account in the *Confessions* is not given in the exact words they spoke; he has merely tried to convey the essence of what was said. That is important, because his description of what happened is full of phrases and echoes of Plotinus, and

we cannot think his mother (from what we know of her education) to have been capable of exchanging philosophical tags with him. Yet he gives the impression that the talk was not one-sided. Undoubtedly Augustine led the way, but he constantly says 'we', 'our thoughts', 'we spoke', as though there was a real exchange of shared experience. The theme with which they began was one which they had discussed at Cassiciacum, that is, the nature of the blessed life. Augustine says that they began by agreeing that no bodily pleasure, however great, could be comparable with the happiness of that life. Then they followed the neoplatonic way of ascending in thought through all the 'degrees' of the material world, up to the heavenly bodies. As they climbed they reflected in increasing wonder and with growing ardour on the marvel of creation. That brought them to the contemplation of their own souls, and to the point where it seemed possible to 'pass beyond' themselves and to reach out towards the eternal Wisdom by which all things are made. For a moment, says Augustine, so great was their longing, they touched it. Then they found themselves back in the world of sense, where the words they spoke were heard and understood in an ordinary way.

He does not say *how* they compared notes or were able to be *sure* that both had had the same experience. There seems to have been a strong common sense of having been in the same place. Perhaps Augustine, at the remove of several years, and with his philosopher's conception of what had happened, is giving us his own picture and assuming his mother's to have been the same. He was working on the *De Genesi ad Litteram*, in which he gives his mature account of the mutual intellectual contemplation of God and the soul which is heavenly bliss, at the time when he finished the *Confessions*, and there had certainly been much progress and refinement in his own thinking in this area since he and his mother had shared the actual experience at Ostia. But he tells us that some progress was made at the time. The return to ordinary language did not bring the experience to an end. They went on talking. Suppose, they said, all these aids to understanding and pointers to God which we see and hear around us in the world were silent, and the soul itself could cease to attend to the clamour of its own thoughts and pass beyond itself, so that we might hear God speak to us directly, not through his creation; suppose that this state of direct communication with God were to continue, the brief moment Augustine and his mother had known extended for eternity; would not this be itself the bliss of heaven?

This shared, conversational mystical experience is conveyed by Augustine — unavoidably — in words, but with an art which seeks to put words in their place, that is, to show their inadequacy for their high purpose here. This sense that words would not do may account for his willingness to reconstruct their conversation in his own words; he clearly did not feel that the actual words they used were important, or themselves the vehicle of the experience, or even the means of their sharing it.

If that is the case, it may perhaps be accounted for in part by Augustine's loss of his mother so soon afterwards. Verbal communication was broken

within days, and broken for ever in this life. But Augustine was left with a strong sense of something accomplished and completed. At the end of their talk, Monica had said, and here he reports her exact words, that she herself had a sense that her work in this world was done and that she had no more to hope for here. Her only reason for wanting to go on living had been to see Augustine become a Christian. God has granted her wish; she sees him now God's servant, despising this world's allurements. 'What is left for me to do in this world?' she asks him (IX.x.26). The emphasis Augustine gives to this exchange in the context of the vision they have just shared shows that it stuck in his mind as a significant part of the whole experience.

It is the more notable, in contrast to this confidence in a continuing union in God, which goes beyond words and does not depend on their meeting in this life again; and this assurance that Monica herself was ready to die and her life fulfilled; that he should give us so many following paragraphs about his struggle to come to terms with her death. Here we are given the counterpart to the shining experience at the window, and the setting in which it remained for Augustine in the years to come. The philosopher largely falls away. After an edifying word about Monica's willingness to die in Italy, where she could not be buried as she had always wished, beside her husband, which is seen as showing that she had been able to renounce even this last 'vain desire' (IX.xi.28). Augustine describes the common experiences of the bereaved in any age and culture. He was bewildered to find that a death which he feels he should, in the circumstances, have been able to accept with more than equanimity, with joy, should have caused him so much pain.

The first task was to comfort his son Adeodatus, for the boy was young enough to show his grief in tears without restraint (IX.xii.29). Augustine says he wanted to cry like a child, too. But he held back the tears because they seemed inappropriate to the great hope into which they were all confident his mother had now entered. Friends and fellow-Christians came to offer their condolences, and Augustine kept up a conversation with them in which he believes he entirely hid his grief from them (IX.xii.31). Inwardly he was fighting the waves of sorrow which swept over him. His Christian *pride* was hurt. He says that he was grieved by his own *weakness* (IX.xii.31). He was able to keep from weeping while the body was carried out for burial and during the Eucharist which was offered for her at the graveside before she was lowered into the earth. He tried praying for comfort, and seemed to get no answer. He went to the baths, in the hope that the act would purge his mind of its anxiety. He came back in the same state as before. Only after he had slept and woken up unguarded, and found that he was now able to enter again into his feelings for his mother, did he begin to weep. He did not weep for long, and he confesses it as a sin (IX.xii.33).

He tried to analyse the reasons for this sorrow, which he continued to feel to be shameful. His loss had been sudden, and he was suffering from shock. He had lost, not only the person but the preciousness of life together. He was bereft of all the comfort he had had from his mother's

presence and her kindness to him. In short, he was grieving for himself. He took ordinary human comfort from the kinds of thought the bereaved draw on in any society. He had done for her in her last illness all that he could. She had said that she could not remember his having said any hard word to her in all his life. Thus he sought to reassure himself where she could no longer reassure him (IX.xii.30).

Now, at the end of this last autobiographical book of the *Confessions*, he stands away to the distance of years where he now lives, and reflects on the value of Christian endeavour for the souls of the dead. He knows that although his mother lived a good life, she cannot have lived without sin from the moment of her baptism. He knows that in strict justice God must condemn her, but he trusts that in mercy he will not. So there is a place for prayer for her sins, and for remembering her in the Eucharist, as she herself devoutly wanted him to do, wherever he was in the world (IX.xi.27).

So to take the vision at Ostia out of its relation to Augustine's account of his mother's death is to take it entirely out of context. Augustine himself could not separate the two. He sets side by side for us the ideal of the Christian hope, in the language of the highest intellectual skills of his day; and the reality of coping with death, with its muddle and confusion and the difficulty of seeing the hope clearly at all in the conflict of contrary emotions. The resolution Augustine offers is to trust himself and his mother to 'our Catholic mother the Church' (IX.xiii.35); he has found and still finds the common citizenship of the City of God the best practical comfort, and the sacraments a practical working bond of love. That is where he finds the means of grace which can reconcile the difference between the *theory* of Christian trust and devotion and the raw reality of trying to make it work in practice.