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Recapitulative Tropes in Augustine's Sermons

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A generation ago in these very pages, Fr. Edmund Hill, O.P. raised our awareness of the intimacy and the intricacies present throughout Augustine's sermons. In 1954, Hill's work represented a scholarly shift from focusing exclusively on the *Confessions*, *De Trinitate* and the *City of God* to seeing what theological emphases Augustine the pastor chose to bring to his daily parishioners. In the essay "St. Augustine as a Preacher", Hill showed how Augustine not only knew his people personally, even calling on them by name and profession, but respectfully used very concrete circumstances of their lives to show them the transformative power of Christ's care (and Fr. Hill's life has since testified to the allure of these homilies, having translated over 400 of them into English for the New City Press' *Works of Saint Augustine* series).[1] Similarly, and more recently, Paul Kolbet's *Augustine and the Cure of Souls* examines Augustine's homiletical practices by stating that the Bishop of Hippo "crafted his sermons to involve his hearers in a reflective process whereby the heretofore unperceived blockages that inhibited their self-perception were brought to the surface and articulated."[2] Both Hill and Kolbet thus see in Augustine's preaching a pastor deeply concerned about the lives of those entrusted to him and accordingly uses his time in the pulpit to move them to God by way of personal reflection.

The purpose of this essay is to build on Hill and Kolbet's insights to show how Augustine achieved this triadic connection between his words, his hearers' desires, and the Lord's promises. By employing (what I shall refer to as) recapitulative tropes, Augustine successfully invites his listeners to reflect on some past experience and emotion, offers Christ as the lone healer of those pains or satisfier of those desires, and then shows how the Lord fulfills his promises.

By "recapitulation", I therefore mean any moment of preaching where the following four-fold rhetorical pattern is present:

(1) The initial prompt for the congregation to examine some experience in their lives. Through certain exhortatory prompts like

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[1] Edmund Hill, O.P., "Augustine as Preacher", *New Blackfriars* 35 (Nov., 1954) 463–71.

[2] Paul R. Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2010) 182.

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redeamus ("let us now return") or *exspectemus* ("what it is we await"), Augustine invites his people to reflect on that it is they lack, hope for, or desire;

(2) Next comes Augustine's introduction of Jesus Christ as the sole solution or antidote to the restlessness just visited;

(3) Augustine next illustrates how the Son descends into each sinner's deficiency by means of his own divine humanity, utilizing various metaphors to illustrate the how the Lord will make himself real in the lives of those present;

(4) This then results in the fourth stage and the subsequent healing and final transformation of that former condition, that initial prompt of introspection.

Of course, recapitulation finds its scriptural warrant in Paul's use of *anakephalaiosis* at Rom 13:9 and Eph 1:10 where Christ is depicted as the New Adam who has come to re-gather and resume what was dissipated in the first Adam. This way of theologizing is most closely united with Irenaeus of Lyons (d. *c*. 202) who saw in Christ as the Second Adam and Mary as the New Eve the way God would heal and accordingly "re-head" all of human existence to himself. By 421 we find Augustine relying explicitly on a Latin version of Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses* (at his anti-Pelagian work, *Contra Julianum* 1.3.5), but there is reason, as Gerald Bonner contends, to think of Irenaeus' theological patterns and teachings as already present in the West well before this citation.[3]

As mentioned, Augustine often begins these recapitulative tropes by employing key phrases obviously dear to him, hortatory subjunctives prompting parishioners to look more deeply into their own hearts to see there what it is they have experienced or for what it is they hope. Such "polite commands" aim to capitalize on the congregation's innate desire for a life other than what they find themselves living for on any given Sunday morning. For example, we hear a rather young Augustine (399 A.D.) invite his listeners thus:

> So let's go back (*redeamus*) and listen... and take a look at ourselves (*inspiciamus nos*) and anything we find defective in ourselves, let us work at putting right with all diligence... May the one who formed us reform us, the one who created us recreate us, the one who installed us restore us to perfection (*s*. 301A.2; Hill, *Sermons* III/8, 291).[4]

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[3] Gerald Bonner, *Freedom and Necessity* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007) 63.

[4] All citations of Augustine come from the New City Press Series (Hyde Park, NY). I shall include these citations in the body of my essay, providing the name of the editor and translator of each work, the numbering of each volume within the series and the page number of the citation.

Returning to their selves, Augustine's congregation is asked to look honestly at whatever brokenness (*quidquid deesse inuenerimus*) they may find within themselves so as to let God know and heal them there. Here we catch a glimpse of the love of a pastor refusing to shy away from a bit of discomfort in exposing defects so as to let the Lord work more promptly and effectively.

This is a manner of prompting Augustine utilizes often: "Take a look at yourselves, go back (*redite*) to your consciences, interrogate your faith, interrogate your love" (*s*. 73A; Hill, *Sermons* III/3, 296; cf. *Jo. eu. tr.* 18.5). By inviting his flock to go back and search their previous experiences under the direction of their own pastor, Augustine the preacher is employing a form of psychagogy, trusting that the Gospel becomes more alive when its interlocutors first sense their own desperation and thus their absolute need for a savior to come to them.[5] As we have seen, this is why such prompts are followed by the introduction of God in terms of a recapitulative couplet: both *creator* and *recreator*, both *formator* and *reformator*.

At one point he has his congregation meditate on the power of God: "Be still (*uacate*). To what purpose? And see that I am God. See that you are not God, but I am. I created you, and I recreate you; I formed you, and I form you anew; I made you, and I remake you. If you had no power to make yourself, how do you propose to re-make yourself?" (*en. Ps.* 45.14; Maria Boulding, *Expositions* (III/16) 322). At other times, such a couplet becomes a prayer: "May the one who formed us, reform us, the one who created us recreate us, the one who installed us restore us to perfection" (*s*. 301A; Hill, *Sermons* III/8, 291). The same God who creates humanity is the same God who redeems humanity: unlike the Manichaean separation between maker and redeemer, the Christian God enters his own creation to reverse the narrative of disobedience.

If this is in fact an anti-Manichean apologetic traceable in Augustine's early presbyteral homilies, it would be fitting to next employ couplets contrasting yet unifying the agency of God, *creator et recreator*, *conditor et reconditor*, and so on. For example, within the Octave of Easter in the year 393 or 394, and before the catechumens and the people of Hippo (certainly with Bishop Valerius in choir) present, Augustine likens the Christian life to a new birth. In one birth we receive a chain of sin, in another it is broken; one birth naturally leads inevitably to death, the other brings life; the first is a birth to parents who will eventually be absent, the other to parents–God and the Church–who are ubiquitous and everlasting. But lest we think of two separate and exclusive selves or lives, the young Augustine opens this rather long homily by stating firmly: "But of course it's the same Lord God who creates us from those natural parents of ours and who recreates us from himself and the Church" (*s*. 260C.1; Hill, *Sermons* III/7, 194).

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[5] For the philosophical history and use of this term *psychagogy*, see Kolbet (*op. cit.*) 7–12; see also my "Becoming Gods by becoming God's: Augustine's Mystagogy of Identification", *Augustinian Studies* 39 (Fall, 2008) 61–74.

Given the dualism Augustine found so attractive as a Manichean, it should not surprise us to see how he very early in his preaching stresses the unity of God not only immanently but even more pastorally significant economically. This is the first effect using the movement of recapitulation has in one of Augustine's sermons and reveals a consistent Augustinian principle, namely that God longs to amend rather than end that which is imperfect. "He didn't, after all, make us and now desert us. He didn't go to the trouble of making us, and then not bother to look after us" (*s*. 26.1; Hill, *Sermons* III/2, 93). God did not create an individual with all of his or her individual histories and experiences, personalities and character traits, simply to dismiss and deny such unique individuality. God created each in the way he did in order to save each in their own particular manners as well. There is not one God who fashioned a fallen self and another God who aims to liberate that historical being, but one God who like a loving Father raised us slowly, beginning with creation and then the law and then the fullness of love in the sending of his Son.

That is why often we find a recapitulative trope in Augustine's homilies on Old Testament passages where the role of the law is examined. Augustine clarifies that the law was given within each human soul so we would realize our own disobedience and infidelities in order that each would realize his or her own sickness and thus search out one who could cure concupiscence. In this way Augustine achieves two goals, one theological, the other psychological. First, against the theological dualism of the Manicheans, he unites the God of the law with the God of grace. Second, he also enables his listeners to quit bifurcating their lives into things holy and things sinful by inviting them to thank God for even the faults (*uitium*) which they have committed.

> So, those who won't acknowledge the Creator are proudly denying their maker, while those who deny their sickness don't acknowledge the necessity of a savior. So let us both praise the Creator for our nature, and for the flaw in it which we have inflicted on ourselves (*s*. 156.2; Hill, *Sermons* III/5, 97).

In this way Augustine unites the God who creates with the God who saves but he also enables his listeners to thank God not only for the glory of their humanity but also for the flaw with which they have inflicted themselves. Grateful even for misused freedoms allows Augustine's parishioners to unify God's power not only as God is in himself but even in their own lives: all things are of his love and providence and even the ways I have hurt myself have allowed me to seek more ardently for one who can save me. Only by reflecting on the wounds of our lives, can we finally catch a glimpse of the promises of Christ and "when you hear of a promiser, wait for a doer" (*audis promissorem, expecta factorem*; *ibid*.).

This recapitulative nature of the Christian economy shines unmatched throughout one of the lost Dolbeau sermons. Delivered in 404 to a congregation in Carthage which was still struggling to understand exactly how they differ from their non-Christian neighbors, many of whom were most likely even intimate friends or family members, this homily yet again provides an excellent example of Augustine's recapitulative style of preaching by introducing God as the one who both gives life and deifies, as both *uiuificator et deificator*. In the life of each Christ calls, God reveals himself not only as a God who gives natural life but also a God who imparts his own divine agency to otherwise merely human creatures. To describe this divine participation, Augustine coins the term *deus deificator* (line 35) and uses this image of God to show that the hope for divinity every human heart carries around is not will not be for naught:

> To what hope the Lord has called us, what we now carry about with us, what we endure, what we look forward to, is well known... We carry mortality about with us, we endure infirmity, we look forward to divinity. For God wishes not only to vivify, but also to deify us. When would human infirmity ever have dared to hope for this, unless divine truth had promised it? (*s.* 23B.1 [lines 1–6]; Hill, *Sermons* III/11, 37).

As we have seen, in Augustine's bold tenderness, he points us to our own infirmities and as we reflect what it is we most truly desire, Augustine uses those areas of unfulfilled hope to show us not where God is repulsed but where God longs (*uult*) to draw near. The contingency and imperfection we all realize deeply within ourselves points us not to despair but to the promissory power of God. But how does he make good on such a pledge?

The next section of the *sermo* 23B accordingly brings us to the third and fourth moments of recapitulation. For we next hear of God's love and that it is in the nature of love to draw near and to take on all that troubles those longing for perfection. We are accordingly assured, when this happens, we shall become like God himself forever:

> Still, it was not enough for our God to promise us divinity in himself, unless he also took on our infirmity, as though to say, "Do you want to know how much I love you, how certain you ought to be that I am going to give you my divine reality? I took to myself your mortal reality." We mustn't find it incredible, brothers and sisters, that human beings become gods, that is, that those who were human beings become gods (*s.* 23B.1 [lines 10–14]; Hill, *Sermons* III/11, 37).

In assuming our weakness (*infirmitatem*), God promises us his own divinity (*diuinam meam*). By becoming one with our own mortality, God deifies us by assuming his own contingent creation and *not* from what he is by nature.

The final section of *sermo* 23B stretches several paragraphs and uses this same formula to deal with a more practically immediate concern, the tribulations of everyday Christian life. Augustine cleverly links daily trials with the divine perfection promised in Jesus Christ. Continuing the recapitulative pattern with which he opened, he now exhorts us to endure our condition because only then can we understand how God can say to each of us: "I will recreate you; I created you mortal, I will recreate you immortal. Put up with your condition, so that you may receive your possession" (*s*.23B.11; Hill, *Sermons* III/11, 43). The use of this couplet, *creator-recreator*, should by now be familiar: Augustine uses the postlapsarian deficiencies of the created level to show us where God refuses to abandon his creation but will, in fact, regather all of fragmented humanity into himself.[6]

This movement from the natural to the supernatural is rhetorically detectable in the sermons delivered on the various feasts of martyrs as well. These Christian heroes freely and even joyfully lay their human bodies down to be slaughtered not because the body is devoid of God's purpose and power but because they know their bodies are theirs for all eternity. Only the perverse and worldly philosophers think the body belongs to this world and the soul to the other world. But we soon hear how, "our God made both the body and the spirit; he is the creator of each, and he also recreates each; he established each of them and he also re-establishes each of them" (*s*. 277.3; Hill, *Sermons* III/8, 34).

On the Feast of Blessed Cyprian, Augustine takes his congregation through the beauty of this North African hero's life, through a solid theology of Christian martyrdom and then concludes this mature paean (dated 417) by calling upon God: "to him be praise and glory, the Lord our God who is both the creator and recreator of humanity." Then, as the crescendo builds, the concluding lines achieve a wonderful effect: just as God created Cyprian and placed him in a particular land and time that needed his talents most—the fledgling North African Church under the strong man Decius who aimed to wipe out God's innocent flock—and just as God was pleased to call Cyprian back as he sinned and misused his talents as a young man, Cyprian in turn displayed those same merciful qualities in his service to God's people when they strayed. In their shared love of unity, the mark of charity for Augustine, both God and Cyprian then, "tolerated the bad" (*s*. 312.6; Hill, *Sermons* III/9, 84), listened patiently to others and strove to maintain the bond of peace. What makes such a homily recapitulative is how Augustine points us to (1) the very concrete (and even unseemly) circumstances of Cyprian's life and times, (2–3) shows how Christ descends precisely there and then (4) reworks Cyprian's natural talents and historical situation for the Church's life and for Father's glory.

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[6] In my *Introduction to Patristic Literature* course here at Saint Louis University, one of my students, a young Jesuit scholastic, recently mentioned that of all the soteriologies present in the Church Fathers, recapitulation seemed the most loving "because Jesus says to the world, 'I have come to make all things new', *not* 'to make all new things'". Thanks to Mr. David Lugo, S.J. for this wonderfully poetic insight.

Another recapitulative trope found within Augustine's homilies is the medicinal. While the Bishop of Hippo was not the first Catholic preacher to transform pagan Aesculapian imagery into Christ the healer, Rudolph Arbesmann's classic opens by maintaining that, "Augustine easily holds the first place among those patristic writers of the West who made use of the *Christus medicus* figure."[7] Paradoxically, Augustine's great physician effects healing not so much by his power but by his humility: "indeed the humble doctor came, he found the patient lying sick, he shared his infirmity with him, summoning him to share his own divinity" (*s*. 341A; Hill, *Sermons* III/10, 30). Such a paradox fits easily into a recapitulative trope: by pointing us to the various illnesses of the human heart, Augustine can represent the Son's kenosis as a way of choosing to meet sinners where they are most infirmed.

Augustine is thereby able to represent once again illness as a blessings, as it is why the great healer has left heaven. Christ now comes to us to find us and only those who know they are sick allow him to have them: "O you strong ones, who need no physician! Strength like this is the mark of fatuity, not fitness... the teacher of humility became a sharer in our infirmity to enable us to share in his divinity" (*en. Ps*. 58, exp. 1.7; Maria Boulding, *Expositions* III/17, 153). God becomes "ill" so we can become strong: he does not neglect those with whom contact means death, but transforms that death into life.

> Do you wish to lay hold of the loftiness of God? First catch hold of God's lowliness. Deign to be lowly, to be humble, because God has deigned to be lowly and humble on the same account, yours, not his own. So catch hold of God's humility, learn to be humble, don't be proud. Confess your infirmity, lie there patiently in the presence of the doctor. When you have caught hold of his humility, you start rising up with him (*s*. 117.17; Hill, Sermons III/4, 220).

The Son's enfleshment perfectly unites divine power with human weakness. In asking his congregation to confess their infirmity,

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[7] Rudolph Arbesmann, 'The Concept of *Christus Medicus* in St. Augustine', *Traditio* 10 (1954) 1–28; 2.

Augustine invites them to see where they need the one true doctor, the one who alone can heal so deeply. Once they realize where it is they are sick, they are able then to lie still (*iace patienter*) so as to allow the great physician to enter and operate. When this descent occurs, the patient is not only healed but elevated and thus transformed forever.

Conclusion

The places where Augustine employs a pattern of recapitulation reveals a deep engagement between a preacher and his people, a courageous pastor who does not shy away from visiting some uncomfortable places in his parishioner's lives. Unfortunately we have no way of knowing how long Augustine would pause after each prompt and there is no way of knowing his facial features and bodily gesticulations. Yet we do know that Augustine was raised in the best of the Latin rhetorical tradition where declamation and oratory in the Late Empire proved to be a sophisticated admixture of persuading and entertaining.

The utility of trained rhetoric aided Augustine's pastoral work throughout his entire life. For example, as he took to writing his guidebook for *Instructing Beginners in Faith* (dated c. 403) he realized that literary repetition used effectively in teaching children had to be presented differently for adults: "Now, if we find it distasteful to be constantly rehearsing familiar phrases that are suited to the ears of small children, we should draw close to these small children with a brother's love, or a father's or a mother's" (*cat. rud.* 12.17). The way out of such tedium, then, is to seek a way to be of one heart with our listeners, to bring our own life's story into sympathetic contact with their situations so as to show the people how even their preacher lives within their hearts, that they are not unknowable or unlovable but are called to find Christ deeply therein. Such mutual compassion "is so strong that, when our listeners are touched by us as we speak and we are touched by them as they learn, each of us comes to dwell in the other, and so they as it were speak in us what they hear, while we in some way learn in them what we teach" (*cat. rud.* 12.17; Raymond Canning, *Instruction Beginners in the Faith* I/10, 97).

Yet as a Christian believer and a Catholic bishop, Augustine also realized that preaching was much more than simply crafting a rhetorically effective address. This is why he often stresses how the people of may be hearing his voice, it is the Lord to whom they should be listening: "*Audi mecum: non, inquam, me audi, sed mecum*" (*s.* 261.2). In this way Augustine visits the human condition not for his people but with them, a sinner who also seeks salvation, also knowing what it is like to want more than the often brutal conditions of mortality apart from Christ. In so doing, he often weaves four moments of recapitulation throughout his homilies: (1) prompting with an invitation for all to reflect on their own unslaked thirsts, (2) then preaching on God's power to remedy all that we sense ails us, (3) next introducing us to the same God who has become flesh for our sake, moving downward into our human condition, (4) so as to make us like himself and thus prove not only his power but the longing for divinity we sensed all these years was accurate and affirming. In this divine descent into the human condition, we now are able to realize how, "Christ had taken the identity of the first human being to himself... He came for no other purpose than that we should be renewed in him, for it is by longing for him and imitating his passion that we are made new" (*en. Ps.* 37.27; Maria Boulding, *Expositions* (III/16) 166).

Augustine himself admits that he uses the pulpit to lead others through a greater self knowledge by building upon their own experiences: "You blame others, you don't look at yourself; you accuse others, you don't think about yourself; you place others before your eyes, you place yourself behind your back. When I accuse, I do the opposite. I take you from behind your back, and put you down in front of your eyes" (*s.* 17.5; Hill, *Sermons* III/1. 369). We can probably all agree that if Augustine is not the master of the mystery of the human heart, he is at least unique in appealing to that inherent restlessness as a way of pointing all human persons to the heart of Christ. To do this, there is a traceable pattern within his preaching especially where he aims to unite the infirmities of mortality we all sense deeply inside with the promise of Christ to make us like himself, thereby radically changing what it means to be human. This is how recapitulative tropes are at work throughout Augustine's sermons: prompting his parishioners to take inventory of their lives and to see therein Christ's love for them, where they are and as they are.

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