Scottish Journal of Theology (2020), **73**, 318–329
doi:10.1017/S0036930620000642

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The beloved icon: an Augustinian solution to the problem of sex

Onsi A. Kamel*

The Davenant Institute, Leesburg, VA, USA
*Corresponding author. E-mail: onsiakamel@outlook.com

Abstract

Augustine famously believed fallen human sex to be inescapably bound up with sinful lust. In every sexual act, lust embodies both the sin of the fall (prideful idolatry) and that sin's consequences. John C. Cavadini has extended Augustine's conception of lust to include domination, and even violence. This leaves us with a disturbing question: is sex without violence possible? Building upon Jean-Luc Marion's distinction between idol and icon, this paper locates a solution to the problem of lust in Augustine's conception of friendship. Identifying the beloved as an icon of God entails relating to the beloved without lustful domination.

Keywords: Augustine; friendship; icon; idolatry; *libido dominandi*; sex

In *The Myth of the Eternal Return* Mircea Eliade argued that premodern man understood the meaning of acts to lie in the 'property of reproducing a primordial act, of repeating a mythical example'.[1] Actions participated in and exemplified mythical events; their significance was never primarily physical. Whatever its general applicability, this claim about the mythic import of premodern acts captures a crucial element of Augustine's vision of human sexuality: there is no 'mere sex'. That is, sex's significance cannot be reduced to the physical interactions of bodies. Its primary meaning, Augustine believed, is derived not from biological facts, nor even from the emotional or psychological states which attend the sexual act, but from the fall. As shall be demonstrated below, Augustine saw the postlapsarian sexual act as inextricably bound up with sinful lust, and such lust as a punishment inherited from the fall. In every sexual act, lust embodies both the sin of the fall and that sin's consequences. Fallen sex sinfully dramatises fallenness.

In this paper, I propose that resources for mitigating the problem of lust in sex may be found in Augustine's iconographic account of Christian friendship, defined as the love of God in the friend. To demonstrate this, it will be necessary to first explicate both Augustine's conception of human sexual lust and John C. Cavadini's Augustinian extension of that concept to include domination. Second, utilising the analytical tool of Jean-Luc Marion's distinction between idol and icon, I will examine Augustine's account

[1]Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask, 2nd edn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 4.

of worldly and heavenly friendship and find therein a solution to the problem of lust. Following this, I will investigate Augustinian habit, and especially the role of habit in enslaving humans to dominating lust. Finally, I will suggest that eucharistic participation, which is Augustine's solution to habituated enslavement, may be the Augustinian means by which Christians can be freed from enslavement to habituated lust.

Augustine, Cavadini and the problem of sex

Augustine believed sexual lust to be the paradigmatic example of God's punishment of pride, the original sin. God had 'commanded obedience' from his rational creature of such a sort that 'submission [was] advantageous' to it; 'the fulfillment of its own will in preference to the creator's' was, by contrast, 'destruction'.[2] Adam and Eve, rational creatures both, recognised their good to consist in obeying God, 'the unchangeable good which ought to satisfy'.[3] Yet, mysteriously, even inexplicably, while recognising their good to be communion with God, and while knowing that disobedience entailed forfeiture of this communion, Adam and Eve sinned. The culprit was pride.

Pride, writes Augustine, is the 'craving for undue exaltation' when 'the soul abandons Him to whom it ought to cleave as its end, and becomes a kind of end unto itself'.[4] Pride is the wish of man and woman to 'be as gods' which drives them to reject the true God (cf. Gen 3:5). Adam and Eve saw the good and, recognising it as the good, rejected it. The fall was thus an inexplicable violation of the rational order. In so acting, Adam and Eve ceased to be rightly constituted, fully rational beings: pride entailed man's 'turning toward himself' and becoming 'contracted', or, in Cavadini's parlance, 'dis-integrated'.[5] This dis-integration had a peculiar, if poetically just, effect: just as man introduced an irrational lawlessness into the created order, so God introduced 'another law in [man's] members', namely, 'the disobedience of his flesh'.[6] In other words, the fact that the sexual organs do not follow the dictates of the will, but respond only to lust, justly results from human disobedience to God.[7] In the fall, the prideful will militated against reason; in the fallen man, the lustful flesh militates against the will. This is man's just punishment.[8]

As defined aptly by Cavadini, lust 'is the expectation of and desire for pleasure' which takes on a life of its own, independent of the will.[9] It is bound up in the disintegration of the person from himself, 'alienated' from the person 'by pride'.[10] East of Eden, Augustine recognises lust as to some degree necessary for the sexual act to occur, but this necessity does not render lust morally neutral. On the contrary, because

[2]Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 14.12, 14.13.

[3]Ibid., 14.13.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.; John C. Cavadini, 'Feeling Right: Augustine on the Passions and Sexual Desire', *Augustinian Studies* 36/1 (2005), p. 201.

[6]Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence* 1.8.

[7]Importantly, while Augustine's account of concupiscence can apply to both men and women, his account of the sexual act as independent of the will and dependent upon sexual lust is informed by distinctly male physiology (especially the erection) and does not apply in the same way to women (who can conceive without lust). Thus the use of the word 'man' in the argument is significant.

[8]Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence* 1.7.

[9]Cavadini, 'Feeling Right', p. 204.

[10]Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000642 Published online by Cambridge University Press

it is a deliverance of pride, lust is wicked, incomprehensible, irrational and enfeebling. For Augustine, not even marital intercourse can occur without lust, so the permissibility of marital intercourse lies solely in its capacity to bring good (i.e. 'the procreation of children') from evil (i.e. lust).[11] Thus, regardless of the context in which it is engaged, the sexual act is, *as such*, compromised by lust.

Furthermore, since lust is inescapably bound up with pride, which, again, is the soul's abandonment of God for the self, it entails self-worship. Consequently, the sexual partner becomes a means for said worship: 'Pride cannot grant that one will be moved in one's deepest self, AS [sic] one's deepest self, by the beauty of someone else *qua* someone else, but rather by one's capacity for sovereignty on its own terms.'[12] Thus, as John Burnaby wrote so eloquently, 'The desire of private possession is just what Augustine regards as the perversion of self-love and the destruction of all love to God.'[13] Inherent in such desire for private possession – what might be described more baldly as the 'use'– of the beloved is a kind of assault on the human person. To treat 'a person as the means to an end does violence to the very essence of the other'.[14] Precisely because a person's true end is God, to use another for the purpose of prideful self-worship violates the integrity of the other. It should come as little surprise, then, that for Augustine's pagan contemporaries, lust was 'in effect a cultural project' of domination and, as illuminated by the harrowing account of the bride's rape in *City of God,* often literally, not merely metaphorically, violent.[15]

This is, no doubt, a startling and even worrying account of sex. Yet its force, as certain strains of feminist thought and recent developments in western public life attest, cannot simply be waved away. If Augustine's account is correct, prideful lust is inherent in the sexual act. If Cavadini's Augustinian extension of the concept of lust is correct, lust includes domination. This leaves us with a disturbing question: is sex without violence possible? Is it possible to be healed of lust such that, 'even if we can never engage sex without it, it does not fully define the experience any longer?'[16] Cavadini gestures toward a solution based in Christ's transformation of his members, that is, the people of the church.[17] This paper proposes a different, although not contradictory, solution: Augustinian friendship models the love of God in the other, and this love may be realised in the faithful by their believing participation in the church's sacraments. To Augustinian friendship we now turn.

The friend: icon or idol? A solution to the problem of sex

Proposing Augustinian friendship as the solution to Augustinian sex may seem akin to suggesting technological development as the solution to malfunctioning technology – it

[11]Augustine, *On Marriage and Concupiscence* 1.9.

[12]Cavadini, 'Feeling Right', p. 209.

[13]John Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St Augustine* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), p. 117.

[14]Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, revised edn (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1993), p. 27. Wojtyla's broader argument is, of course, based on a quasi-Kantian scheme of means and ends. It is, therefore, rather different from Augustine's argument and the argument advanced here. This particular statement, though, helpfully illuminates Cavadini's Augustinian wrestling with lust and domination.

[15]Cavadini, 'Feeling Right', pp. 198, 209. Strikingly, as Cavadini has demonstrated, Augustine's critique of sex is similar to certain feminist critiques, especially that of Andrea Dworkin.

[16]Ibid., p. 211.

[17]Ibid., p. 215.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000642 Published online by Cambridge University Press

might solve the immediate problem, but it will merely generate more problems of the same sort. Many worry that Augustinian friendship is use-oriented and, given that the problem in Augustinian sex is its prideful use of the other, concern about proposing Augustinian friendship as the solution to Augustinian sex is understandable.[18] Will Augustine's vision of friendship merely solve one kind of use with another kind?

Properly understanding Augustine's claims about friendship will, I hope, assuage the fears of those concerned. It will be helpful, first, to examine the classical, non-Christian accounts of friendship Augustine references and eventually critiques on Christian grounds. Prior to his conversion in the *Confessions*, Augustine uses classical philosophical language to describe his friendship with an unnamed man. In sharp contrast to the bad friendships with which Augustine filled his boyhood, this was based in shared interests and ardent mutual affection.[19] In describing it, Augustine references Cicero's *On Friendship* and quotes Horace ('He was half my soul'), Ovid (they were 'one soul in two bodies') and perhaps Aristotle, who made the same claim as Ovid.[20] If, as Valk writes concerning Aristotelean friendship, 'The highest form of friendship … becomes a kind of exchange of selfhood, a series of self-disclosures that continues over a long period of time', pre-conversion Augustine seems to have agreed: 'He was my "other self".'[21]

Following his conversion, however, Augustine's attitudes shifted. No longer did friendship consist only or primarily in an exchange of selfhood. Instead, true friendship was constituted by loving 'God in your friend'.[22] Love of God in the friend is the same love by which we love ourselves. Thus, 'If we love ourselves' – or, by extension, our friends – 'for any other reason, we are in fact hating rather than loving'.[23] To love the friend is to love God in and for the friend, just as proper self-love is loving God in and for oneself. This may seem like a convoluted paradox: how can one love another by loving someone *besides* that other for the sake of that other? Should we not love our friends for their own sakes? These are two separate questions, and both will be answered in the process of by investigating what, exactly, Augustine means by 'loving God in the friend'.

Friendship explained: the icon of God

Augustine claims friendship is loving God in another – but what can this mean? As shall be shown below, it means loving someone while recognising he points beyond himself to God: 'Earthly neighbors are loved well according to love's heavenly referent in God.'[24] This is, in one sense, straightforward Augustinian anthropology: because each person's final good is God, to 'love' anyone without wishing this good for him

[18]Kyle Hubbard, 'Idolatrous Friendship in Augustine's *Confessions*', *Philosophy and Theology* 28/1 (2016), pp. 44–5. He cites Hannah Arendt and C. S. Lewis as critics of Augustinian friendship on the grounds that it is use-oriented.

[19]Marie Aquinas McNamara, *Friends and Friendship for Saint Augustine* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1964), p. 64.

[20]Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 4.6.11.

[21]Frank Vander Valk, 'Friendship, Politics, and Augustine's Consolidation of the Self', *Religious Studies* 45/2 (June 2009), p. 126; cf. Augustine, *Confessions* 4.6.11.

[22]Augustine, *Sermons* 336.2.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Sarah Stewart-Kroeker, *Pilgrimage as Moral and Aesthetic Formation in Augustine's Thought* (Oxford: OUP, 2017), p. 214.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000642 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is not love, but a form of hatred. Augustinian (Christian) friendship is based, therefore, on the recognition that the friend is, as Jean-Luc Marion defines the term, an *icon*.[25] An icon 'summons sight in letting the visible … be saturated little by little with the invisible'.[26] The beholder's gaze does not remain fixed upon the icon, but, in gazing upon the icon, he gazes also upon that to which the icon points.

Recognising that the friend is an icon dissolves the perceived dichotomy between loving God in the friend and loving the friend. One need not choose. In loving the friend as an icon (i.e. in loving God in the friend), one loves God *and* friend together. The friend does not simply absorb his friend's love; as an icon, he refers it beyond himself, so that, as he is loved, so is God loved: 'The true icon never encourages the observer to focus on the visible itself but allows the invisible to be revealed in the visible'.[27] It is precisely this feature of the icon, that as it is loved God is loved in one and the same love, that permits Augustine to reverse the directionality of friend-love in *Confessions*. There, to love a friend is to love him 'in God', whereas in *Sermon* 336 it was to love God 'in the friend'.[28] Loving a friend 'in God' recognises that the soul of the friend is 'established in' God, that without God friends 'go their way and perish'.[29] Thus, the problem with loving the friend only for the friend's sake is that it amounts to hatred, for it wills the friend's ultimate dissolution. Friendship recognizes the friend's 'good consists in [his] relation to God'.[30] In sum, for Augustine, true Christian friendship means loving God in the friend, or loving the friend in God, so that the friend functions as an icon. Only thus is it possible to love God and friend together.

How might Augustinian friendship solve the problem of sex? Again, the problem with sex is lust: the desire for pleasure manifested in the use of the beloved for the prideful, selfish ends of the lover. The lusting eye perceives the other as an object whose purpose is one's own gratification rather than as a subject whose good is God. As shown above, for Augustine, friendship is possible only insofar as the friend is an icon of God, referring one's gaze beyond himself to God. Augustinian friendship, therefore, provides the conceptual tools to fix Augustinian sex, for it recognises that to love another in and for God is to stop loving that other in and for oneself. Friendship precludes domination. My proposal, then, is this: insofar as the beloved is loved as an icon of God, as one in whom God is loved and for whom God is willed as the only good, lust ceases to characterise the sexual act. To will God for another is to cease willing that other for oneself.

Friendship exposed: The problem of idolatry

If the solution to the problem of sex is to love God in the beloved, the question is how one can be transformed from an idolater to one who sees others as icons. To answer this question, it is necessary to examine idolatry in friendship more fully. The account of iconographic friendship given above is distinctly Christian; non-Christian friendships,

[25]For other fruitful investigations of Augustinian friendship in relation to Marion's concept of icon, see Richard B. Miller, 'Evil, Friendship, and Iconic Realism in Augustine's *Confessions*', *Harvard Theological Review* 104/4 (Oct. 2011), pp. 387–409; and Hubbard, 'Idolatrous Friendship'.

[26]Jean-Luc Marion, Thomas A. Carlson and David Tracy, *God without Being: Hors-Texte*, 2nd edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), p. 17.

[27]Hubbard, 'Idolatrous Friendship', p. 52.

[28]Augustine, *Confessions* 4.12.18.

[29]Ibid.

[30]Hubbard, 'Idolatrous Friendship', p. 52.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000642 Published online by Cambridge University Press

for Augustine, cannot follow the pattern of the icon. As with fallen human sex, so, too, with fallen human friendship: it is characterised by pride, domination and, therefore, idolatry. Examining fallen human friendship and the problem of idolatry in it will set us on the path which leads to loving the beloved as an icon.

As discussed above, in book 4 of the *Confessions*, Augustine provides a moving account of the death of an unnamed friend. As we saw, Augustine uses the language of classical authors to describe their love. Theirs was a deep union. At his friend's passing, Augustine was devastated; he became restless and agitated, and he could find no diversion or escape from his misery.[31] Crucially, because Augustine had not yet converted, their friendship was not yet redeemed by grace. It was a fallen friendship, beset with the problems attending such friendships. These problems are strikingly similar to the problems of fallen sex, and an anecdote Augustine tells about his friend's baptism before his death is instructive.

Prior to his friend's illness, Augustine convinced his friend to become a Manichaean. When Augustine's friend temporarily lost consciousness, he was baptised without his knowledge.[32] When he awakened, Augustine attempted to get his friend to mock his baptism, but 'he was horrified at me as if I were an enemy'.[33] Augustine was 'dumbfounded and perturbed'.[34] He planned to wait for his friend's recovery, the better to 'do what [he] wished with him'.[35] This sentence reveals all: despite Augustine's eloquent classical citations about the nature of their friendship, he did not love his friend truly. He wished to possess his friend, to use him for his own ends.

Hence, perhaps counterintuitively, Augustine's deep despair at his friend's death. His friend's life was so bound up with his own that his friend's death was akin to his death. It left him 'tired of living and scared of dying'.[36] Augustine was 'more surprised that when he was dead I was still alive'.[37] Because Augustine wished to use his friend, his friend had become an extension of his own being – a tool. To lose his friend was to lose a means of accomplishing his will. But for what did Augustine wish to use him? What function was his friend fulfilling? Prior to his conversion, Augustine writes, he loved friends 'as a substitute for [God]'.[38] Augustine's friend became to him an idol and a false god which Augustine wrongly imbued with the qualities of the one true God. As a result, Augustine lost sight of his friend's corruptibility, of his mere humanity.[39] The death of Augustine's friend was the death of god.

One might, of course, be tempted to find an inconsistency in the above account. Did Augustine wish to use his friend for his own purposes or to worship him as an idol? People serve idols; they do not use idols. In this case, however, there is no need to choose between serving and using, for, as Hubbard argues, 'The idol is the invisible mirror of the human gaze.'[40] Indeed, the idol actually 'depends on the gaze that it satisfies'.[41] The idol is a construct of the human by which the human worships himself. To

[31]Augustine, *Confessions* 4.8.12.
[32]Ibid., 4.4.8.
[33]Ibid.
[34]Ibid.
[35]Ibid.
[36]Ibid., 4.6.11.
[37]Ibid.
[38]Ibid., 4.8.13.
[39]Ibid., 4.6.11.
[40]Hubbard, 'Idolatrous Friendship', p. 50.
[41]Marion, *God Without Being*, p. 10.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000642 Published online by Cambridge University Press

serve the idol is to serve the self. It is precisely *because* Augustine has substituted his friend for God that he wishes to use him for himself. If the friend's final good is not recognised to be God, one will satisfy oneself in the friend by using him to advance one's own ends. 'For Augustine, narcissism and idolatry are two sides of the same coin.'[42]

The possibility of idolatrous friendship is important for two reasons. First, it demonstrates that the issue at stake in friendship is analogous to the issue of sex, namely, simultaneously idolising and using the other. Second, it further demonstrates that the key problem in both sex and friendship is the will. The gaze creates the idol and wills the idol's existence for itself. Speaking of his state after the death of his friend, Augustine writes, 'I should have lifted myself to you, Lord, to find a cure. I knew that, but did not wish it or have the strength for it.'[43] Although it was a problem with his will, Augustine was unable to abandon his idolatry. He needed medicine. In examining how he found it, we will find the solution to our own problem.

Reforming habits by finding grace

As Marion has argued, and as Augustine claimed above, the problem of idolatry is a problem of the will. 'The gaze makes the idol', and 'the manner of seeing decides what can be seen'.[44] This claim leads to an intriguing possibility: if the human gaze, by the human will, makes an idol, it can unmake it. So why does the willing subject not simply *decide* to love the beloved in God? Augustine's answer is alarming: he cannot. The willing subject is bound by habit. In finding Augustine's solution to the problem of sinful habit we will also find the possibility of redeemed sex characterised by the love of God in the beloved.

In book 10 of the *Confessions*, Augustine analyses various kinds of lust and the role of habit in enslaving humans to these lusts. Reflecting on 'the lust of the flesh', Augustine makes two striking assertions in three consecutive sentences. First, 'anyone who could change from worse to better' can 'change from better to worse', and divine mercy alone guarantees there will be no backsliding.[45] Second, prior to Augustine's conversion, 'the pleasures of the ear had a … tenacious hold on [him], and subjugated [him]'.[46] Lustful pleasures, sexual or not, take captive those who indulge them such that the indulgent eventually become slaves who can only succumb. Even after one's conversion, when one wills to do the right, sinful habits are so ingrained that one is incapable of doing what one wills.

Augustine's case study is musical delight, which functions similarly to sexual delight, not least because both are lusts of the flesh. Augustine can be tempted to give 'well-trained voices more honor than is fitting'.[47] At times 'physical delight … deceives me when the perception of the senses is unaccompanied by reason, and is not content to be in a subordinate place'.[48] This is precisely the problem of sexual lust: it takes upon itself a life of its own, unaccompanied by reason, and subjugates the willing

[42]Miller, 'Evil, Friendship, and Iconic Realism', p. 391.
[43]Augustine, *Confessions* 4.7.12.
[44]Marion, *God without Being*, p. 9.
[45]Augustine, *Confessions* 10.32.48.
[46]Ibid., 10.33.49.
[47]Ibid.
[48]Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000642 Published online by Cambridge University Press

subject. The pleasure of aural bliss, and the lust for it, often takes pride of place over the delight of rationally contemplating the scriptures, which the music ought to serve.

The mode of Augustine's enslavement brings into sharp relief the crux of the problem for sexual lust. Augustine's slavery is to 'habitual practices'.[49] These constantly 'reabsorb' him such that he is 'held in their grip'.[50] Crucially, Augustine does not wish to be so held, but he is utterly unable to break free. Echoing Romans 7, Augustine claims, 'Here I have the power to be, but do not wish it. There I wish to be, but lack the power.'[51] Augustine, and indeed all sinners, have been so habituated into relating to worldly goods out of lustful desire that, even once they recognise their errors, they cannot change. Before, Augustine willed to fulfil lust; now he fulfils it against his will. This is the summit of human dis-integration.

The example of aural lust instructs doubly: Augustine was enslaved to it, but surprisingly, following his conversion, Augustine achieved some modicum of 'restful contentment' from temptation of the ears.[52] 'Now', he wrote, 'I am moved not by the chant but by the words being sung.'[53] The relevant question is *how* such a thing was possible. What moved Augustine from being an unwilling slave to his passions to a rational, willing master of them? This question is important because Augustine expresses a confidence about healing from aural lust which he does not extend to sexual lust. In virtue of their shared genus (i.e. fleshly lust), however, the possibility of such healing could be extended faithfully to sexual lust in accord with Augustine's premises.

The eucharist as the principal iconic reality

Before proceeding to Augustine's solution to the problem of slavery to lust, let us briefly sum up the investigation thus far. Owing to the fall, in which Adam and Eve incomprehensibly rebelled against God by seeking to become their own Gods, God punished man's prideful, willing rebellion against the good. He rendered human bodies disobedient to human reason and will. Cavadini aptly calls this 'dis-integration'. Dis-integration is paradigmatically evidenced in the sexual act, the accomplishment of which necessitates prideful, ultimately dominating lust. Lust uses its object to fulfil the lusting subject's desires rather than allowing the lover to love the beloved in God. Lust is ultimately idolatrous because it fails to point the beloved to the true good (i.e. God) and treats the beloved as the lover's true good. I proposed a solution: Augustinian friendship, in which the friend becomes an icon of the divine, such that God is loved in the friend, undermines the dynamics of idolatry. Loving God in another means willing God for him; and willing God for another precludes willing that other for oneself. The problem of habit, addressed in the prior section, is the impediment to realising this transformation from idolatry to iconography. Fallen man is habituated to idolatrous lust and cannot escape it of himself. Below, then, it is necessary to chart out Augustine's solution to the problem of lust: grace working through faith to rehabituate the faithful by their participation in the eucharist.

Augustine begins and ends book 10 of the *Confessions*, in which he details his post-conversion enslavement to habituated lust, with extended meditations upon grace and

[49]Ibid., 10.11.65.
[50]Ibid.
[51]Ibid.; cf. Rom 7:15.
[52]Ibid., 10.33.49.
[53]Ibid.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000642 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the incarnation, priestly mediation and the ongoing salvific activity of Christ. Augustine's initial reflection foregrounds the inability of his 'human readers' to 'heal [his] diseases', that is, those lusts to which he had become habituated and therefore by which he was enslaved.[54] By contrast, God has 'forgiven and covered up' Augustine's 'past wickednesses', and his grace alone 'transform[s] [Augustine's] soul'.[55] Lest anyone descend 'into the sleep of despair', concluding that his wounds cannot be healed, Augustine emphasises that grace gives the 'weak person … power', transforming the soul 'by faith and [God's] sacrament'.[56] God's grace, working through faith and the church's sacraments, transforms the soul and strengthens the Christian to overcome sin.

In the concluding meditation of book 10, Augustine again remembers the promise of God to 'heal all [his] diseases'.[57] Without God's promise, Augustine would be 'in despair'; but he knows God's 'medicine is still more potent' than his diseases.[58] This medicine, Augustine proclaims, is nothing else than Christ, God's Word who 'had become flesh and dwelt among us'.[59] Crucially, as medicine, Christ is distributed, eaten and drunk in the eucharist.[60] Augustine finds healing at the Lord's Table.

Augustine's claims about the eucharist as a locus of healing points to its unique nature. The eucharist elevates the faithful above what is seen to the unseen and spiritual reality beyond. In the eucharist, what can be seen is 'bread and a cup', but faith teaches that 'the bread is the body of Christ, the cup the blood of Christ'.[61] Or again, 'What can be seen has a bodily appearance, what is understood has a spiritual fruit.'[62] In short, in the sacraments, 'one thing is seen, another is to be understood'.[63] In the eucharist, bread and wine point beyond themselves to the invisible reality present in them: Christ himself. Faith teaches that, even though bread and wine are received (or appear to be received, depending upon one's interpretation of Augustine) physically, Christ's body and blood are received sacramentally.

Because the eucharist moves the faithful beyond the sensible to the insensible, because it 'makes use of the material to lead us to the immaterial', it is 'effective … for reforming minds obsessed with the material'.[64] The eucharist is a rehabituation, an unlearning of carnal modes of thought. By it, participants are healed of their habituated infirmities, learning to see Christ beyond the elements by faith, to love the thing signified in and through the sign. The eucharist teaches Christians iconographic relations.

If the problem of sex is habituated lust, which selfishly dominates another, the solution is being taught to see and receive Christ in the eucharistic bread and wine. In so doing, one becomes newly habituated to loving God in created realities, that is, in icons; in our case, this means loving God in and through the beloved. The eucharist makes

[54]Ibid., 10.3.3.
[55]Ibid., 10.3.4.
[56]Ibid.
[57]Ibid., 10.43.69.
[58]Ibid.
[59]Ibid.
[60]Ibid., 10.43.70.
[61]Augustine, *Sermons* 272.
[62]Ibid.
[63]Ibid.
[64]Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), p. 158.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000642 Published online by Cambridge University Press

possible the loving of God in the beloved and the beloved in God. Gradual rehabituation is a condition for true friendship and therefore for a sexuality characterised not by dominating lust but by a love of God in, with, through and for the beloved. Ultimately, the end of the eucharist is 'harmonious unity', because it is the 'ultimate shape of the restored human community'.[65] Presumably, such harmonious unity would extend to the hidden recesses of human life, not demurring to take up its place in the marriage bed.

As an aside, lest this solution seem appropriate only for Catholics or the Orthodox, it is important to recognise this solution is also perfectly in keeping with the sacramentology of the magisterial Protestant traditions. Whatever Augustine's position on the presence of Christ's human body in the elements – and there is a great deal of debate on this point – the crucial aspect of his account of the eucharist as medicinal rehabituation is a point upon which magisterial Protestants, Catholics and Eastern Orthodox agree. Namely, our senses tell the faithful they receive mere bread and wine, but faith teaches them that they receive Christ himself – spiritual healing under the sign of physical sustenance.

Engaging Cavadini's solution

Near the beginning of this paper, I stated that my solution does not compete with Cavadini's, but that I imagine my solution as a complement to his. Whereas his project was laying out the problem of lust as Augustine saw it, connecting lust to Augustine's thought on domination and briefly providing a solution, my task has been to lay out the problem Cavadini raises, introduce to it the further problem of the will's enslavement to habit and provide a solution at greater length. There is much to glean from Cavadini's proposal, and some also to critique.

Pointing to the incarnation, Cavadini argues that Christians may possess an 'imagination' in which 'Christ offers to us the reality of an emotional life which is fully free … and so calls to us beyond dissembling to deeper feeling, to self-possession'.[66] Commenting on Augustine's sermon on Psalm 30, Cavadini writes that incarnate Christ truly fears, but his 'fear is a function of the Incarnation, of his having declared his solidarity with our life. He feels *our* fear.'[67] By the same token, because Christians are members of Christ, we 'are being transfigured into Christ's way of feeling'.[68] For Cavadini, as, of course, for Augustine, the divine medicine is Christ the incarnate one, in whom Christians are transformed by participation. Specifically, Christ transforms the human imagination, such that it is capable of putting on Christ, gradually, by speaking his words and doing his deeds after him.[69]

My proposal is not an attempt to contradict Cavadini but to fill out his account. What might 'being transfigured into Christ's way of feeling' mean as we relate to our beloveds? I suggested it means adopting an iconographic frame, such that the beloved becomes truly loved as God is loved in her. It is in recognising that humans are signs, *icons*, whose function is to point to God, that the redeemed human being puts on the imagination of Christ. How might this transformation occur concretely? Cavadini did

[65]Ibid., p. 160.
[66]Cavadini, 'Feeling Right', p. 211.
[67]Ibid., p. 213.
[68]Ibid.
[69]Ibid., pp. 213–14.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000642 Published online by Cambridge University Press

not address – did not intend to address – the problem of habit or, by extension, the 'bondage of the will'; such bondage prevents the Christian from acting in accord with his new imagination, his new will. If the Christian is enslaved by habit – even after having been incorporated into Christ's body, death and resurrection in baptism – a new ritual habituation is needed precisely to make the transformed imagination efficacious over against habit. 'The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak' (Matt 26:41, RSV). The eucharist, by which the faithful, week in and week out, actively receive the sign as the thing signified, makes possible the extension of iconographic vision to other realms, including the sexual. New behaviour becomes, for the first time, a true possibility.

Conclusion

This paper has taken up the problem of Augustinian sexual lust. As a result of the fall, which was wilful human disobedience against the rationally comprehended Good, man was punished with a will impotent in relation to the flesh. This is exemplified in the sexual act, for which lust, operating almost entirely independently of the will, is necessary. This lust, as Cavadini demonstrates, is not mere sexual desire. It is, instead, a prideful desire to possess another for one's own gratification. It is a form of idolatry in which one both sees the other as one's own ultimate good and possesses the other to attain said good. In other words, lust constitutes a kind of violence against the beloved, a domination.

The solution taken up above is that of friendship, which Augustine defines as the love of God in the friend; friendship nullifies this kind of possessive desire. In recognising God as the friend's final good, one no longer desires to possess the friend as a means of obtaining one's own (albeit wrongly understood) final good. Friendship thus conceived is an instance of what Jean-Luc Marion characterises as the icon: the earthly and visible reality by which the heavenly reality is received. Iconography precludes the possibility of idolatry.

Just when we had identified this solution, however, we were met with a further problem: the impotence of the will. The will cannot change its behaviour – or, perhaps incomprehensibly, is incapable of changing human behaviour – no matter how much the individual wishes to do so, because it is enslaved to habit. As Augustine contends, however, grace alone can heal and strengthen the will, and the eucharist, as a crucial means of receiving grace, effects a rehabituation which enables the Christian to put on iconographic spectacles and act accordingly. In brief, this paper proposed the following: lust is the problem; iconographic friendship is the solution; habit is the obstacle; the eucharist is the means of overcoming the obstacle.

There is much that remains to be investigated, especially the contents of the redeemed Christian's imagination and how this imagination might transform other aspects of relating to the world. As Cavadini proposed, the Christian's participation in Christ ultimately transforms the imagination. Insofar as it proclaims Christ's death, the eucharist proclaims also the death of the Christian, who was baptised into this death.[70] The imagination of one dead and resurrected is the imagination of one who possesses all things precisely because he possesses nothing in himself. He possesses all things only as they exist and subsist in God, to whom they ceaselessly point. He possesses all things as icons.

[70]See e.g. 1 Cor 11:26 and Rom 6:3.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000642 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Eliade, in sum, got the story half-right. In Augustine's view, only fallen human action points backward, mythically embodying the fall. Christian behaviour, by contrast, points *forward*. The meaning of the Christian's acts is not mythical – it is eschatological. Christian action may, falteringly and ever imperfectly, escape fallen modes of being and embody the iconographic truth of the new creation. Christian action points to the day when everyone will see that God is all in all (Eph 1:15–23).

Cite this article: Kamel OA (2020). The beloved icon: an Augustinian solution to the problem of sex. *Scottish Journal of Theology* **73**, 318–329. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930620000642