

St Augustine as apologist for the resurrection of Christ

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Abstract

In his sermons, *Answer to Faustus a Manichean*, and other works, Augustine insisted that belief in Christ's resurrection establishes the identity and defines the faith of Christians. In justifying resurrection belief, he appealed to evidence from (1) created nature and (2) human history, and to (3) the desires and experiences of those he addressed. From the perspective of creation, 'the miracle' of the world and all the wonders it contains (particularly the worldly pattern of 'new life after death') support Easter faith. Historically, Augustine argues from a visible *effect* (almost the whole of Roman society accepting the resurrection) to the only adequate *cause* of this phenomenon (Christ's victory over death). Finally, the human hunger for happiness, Augustine argues, finds its fulfilment only through sharing in Christ's resurrection – though in this context he does not forget the light provided by the Holy Spirit, through whom 'with the eyes of the heart we behold' the risen Christ (*Sermon 263*).

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St Augustine frequently insisted that belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ establishes the faith and identity of Christians. In a sermon preached during the Easter octave of 418, for example, he exhorted the congregation: 'Let us believe in Christ crucified, but in him who rose again on the third day. That's the faith which . . . distinguishes us from the pagans, distinguishes us from the Jews; the faith by which we believe that Christ has risen from the dead' (*Serm. 234.3*).¹ In a sermon preached a few years earlier he had stated: 'the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is the distinctive mark (*forma*) of the Christian faith . . . both friends and enemies have believed that Christ was crucified and died; that he rose again, only his friends have known'. Hence Augustine concluded: 'this is what defines our faith, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ' (*Serm. 229H.1, 3*).²

¹ *Sermons (230–272B)*, trans. Edmund Hill (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1993), p. 37.

² *Sermons (184–229Z)*, trans. Edmund Hill (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1996), pp. 295, 297.

Not only Augustine's sermons but also his apologetic works feature this conviction. In a work written between 408 and 410 against Faustus the Manichean, he observed: 'Even the pagans, to be sure, believe that Christ died, but the faith proper to Christians is that he rose' (*Contra Faust.* 16.29).³ But why should non-believers come to hold this faith? What could explain and justify belief in the resurrection of Jesus either for outsiders or for Christians wavering in their Easter faith? What kind of an 'apology' did Augustine develop to legitimate the 'distinctive mark of Christian faith'?

His apology for Christ's resurrection took a triple form. He appealed to (1) creation and evidence from created nature, (2) evidence from human history, and (3) the desires and experiences of those whom he addressed. Let us take up in turn the three 'appeals' that Augustine made.

The creation and the created world

Background beliefs and theories often prove decisive when facing the resurrection of Jesus and the hope for general resurrection.⁴ In this context Augustine's 'prior' faith in God as creator, almost inevitably, proves essential for his argument. 'The creator who made all things from nothing', Augustine maintains, will not 'lack the means' when it comes to the work of resurrection (*Civ.* 22.13).⁵ Since in his 'wisdom and compassion' God 'created what was not', he is also able to 'free what he created from corruption' (*Civ.* 22.27).⁶ Through his 'omnipotence' the creator can 'revive' and 'restore' the dead to life (*Civ.* 22.20).⁷

Moving beyond this general presupposition, Augustine points specifically to 'the miracle' of the world and all the marvels we observe in it. Apropos of the resurrection not only of Christ but also of others, he asks, 'Why, then, would God not have the power to make the bodies of the dead rise again? He is the one who created a world full of innumerable marvels in the heavens, on earth, in the air, and in the waters; and of course the world itself is without

³ *Answer to Faustus a Manichean*, trans. Roland Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007), p. 222.

⁴ See G. O'Collins, *Easter Faith: Believing in the Risen Jesus* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003), pp. 1–24.

⁵ *The City of God XI–XXII*, trans. William Babcock (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2013), p. 525.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 526.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 530; on Augustine's belief in God as creator, see Rowan Williams, 'Creation', in Allan D. Fitzgerald (ed.), *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 251–4. Mark Vessey (ed.), *A Companion to Augustine* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) has a chapter on redemption (by Lewis Ayres, pp. 416–27), but none on creation.

doubt a greater and more outstanding miracle than all the wonders with which it is filled' (Civ. 21.7; emphasis added).⁸ The wonders in the world and the wonder that is the whole created world, 'itself a unique miracle and the greatest of them all' (Civ. 21.9; emphasis added), encourage Augustine to accept that God can raise the dead and, in fact, has raised the crucified Jesus.⁹

Many people today, to be sure, do not share Augustine's astonishment at the marvellous universe in which we live. Yet there are also many who find themselves amazed at what modern cosmology and biology have revealed about the workings of nature. Astonishment at the wonders of God's creation might well predispose them to accept the Christian belief in the new creation that is Christ's resurrection and ours.

Augustine introduces specific analogies from the natural world that can lend plausibility to belief in the resurrection of Christ and the general resurrection to come. 'The whole of creation speaks of resurrection', he says in a sermon from: each day, for instance, waking follows sleeping, and each year the leaves on trees return (Serm. 361.10).¹⁰ Some of Augustine's predecessors had already developed this analogy. To strengthen hope in our coming resurrection Clement of Rome, for example, noted some 'processes of resurrection going on' all the time in nature: the succession of day and night and the crops which come into being from the seed that 'decays' in the earth (1 Clement 24).¹¹ Tertullian appealed to the divine power shown in the change of seasons, the return of daylight after the darkness of the night and the 'greater fruitfulness' of seeds 'when they have rotted and are destroyed'.¹² He concluded that 'all things are preserved by dying. All things from their destruction are restored.'¹³ For these and other ancient Christian authors, the pattern of 'new life after death' found in the natural world hints

⁸ *City of God* XI–XXII, p. 457.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 464. See also Civ. 22.24 (*City of God*, p. 541) where Augustine enthusiastically rejoices in the beauty of created nature. Below we will come to physical miracles (such as healings) to which Augustine appeals. But here he uses 'miracle' in the broader sense of that which excites wonder; for Augustine creation is the great miracle, since it reflects the very creative nature of God. A little surprisingly there is no entry 'Miracle' in Fitzgerald's *Augustine through the Ages*; 'miracle' does not even feature in the index, as is also the case with Vessey's *Companion to Augustine*.

¹⁰ *Sermons* (341–400), trans. Edmund Hill (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1995), p. 231.

¹¹ *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (London: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 36.

¹² Tertullian, *De resurrectione carnis* 12, trans. Peter Holmes, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1884), pp. 234–5.

¹³ Tertullian, *Apology*, 48.8, trans. Emily Joseph Daly (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1950), p. 119.

at the resurrected life that came to Jesus after his death and burial and will come to others.

All those who read or heard the New Testament were already familiar with the picture of grain that 'dies' in the earth and gives rise to fertile, new life (John 12:23–4; 1 Cor 15: 37–8). Modern worshippers at Easter sing J. M. Crum's hymn (set to a French carol melody): 'Now the green blade riseth, from the buried grain, / Wheat that in the dark earth many days has lain. / Love lives again, that with the dead has been. / Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green.'

When replying to objections against the resurrection in *The City of God*, Augustine takes up the union of soul and body, where 'nature' allows something 'incorporeal to be bound by a corporeal tie'. In a wonderful way souls are joined to 'earthly bodies' and 'give them life'. This allows Augustine to argue *a fortiori*: 'if the soul, which is more exalted than any body' can 'be bound to an earthly body, what keeps an earthly body from being elevated to a heavenly body by the will of the same God who made this living being?' Thus Augustine's anthropology enables him to press the question: 'Why is it that we are not much more astounded and amazed that incorporeal souls . . . are bound to bodies than we are that our bodies, though earthly, should be elevated to abodes which, though heavenly, are nevertheless corporeal?' In other words, why do we fail to recognise (a) the union of soul and body as more marvellous than (b) the heavenly transformation of our earthly body that resurrection involves? Augustine suggests:

The explanation can only be that we see the former all the time – it is in fact what we are – but we are not yet the latter and have never seen it all. If we consult sober reason, however, we shall surely find that it is a more wondrous divine work to interweave corporeal and incorporeal things in some way than it is to link heavenly and earthly things which, although different, are nevertheless both corporeal. (Civ. 22.4)¹⁴

Endorsing the force of this argument from a greater wonder (the union of soul and body that is the human condition) to a lesser wonder (the heavenly transformation entailed by resurrection) obviously depends on accepting Augustine's 'dualist' anthropology. His line of apologetics belongs within a 'background theory' of creation and, in particular, of the nature of human beings that can lend credibility to resurrection belief.

¹⁴ *City of God* XI–XXII, pp. 499–500.

Human history: the 'contemptible' witness

If nature makes resurrection believable, so too does human history. Augustine argues from the visible effect which his readers could see for themselves (almost the whole of Roman society by that time accepting the resurrection of Jesus) to the only adequate cause for this historical phenomenon: Christ's victory over death. Since the original witnesses to that resurrection were ill equipped, the success of their message of Christ's resurrection cannot be explained on merely human grounds. God must have worked in and through these witnesses and established the truth of their message.

Thus unless one accepts the resurrection, one cannot, Augustine claims, account for an 'incredible' historical fact: 'a few fishermen out on the sea of this world with the nets of faith, with no education in the liberal arts, completely untaught in the doctrines of pagan thought, not trained in grammar, nor equipped with dialectic, nor swollen with rhetoric', could manage to catch 'all those fish of every kind and even – more wonderful still, because more rare – some of the philosophers themselves'. In short, 'a few obscure men, of no standing and of no education, were so effective in persuading the world, including the learned of something so incredible' – namely, 'that Christ rose in the flesh and ascended with his flesh into heaven' (Civ. 22.5).¹⁵

Augustine names here the first three of the liberal disciplines highly valued in the Roman world (grammar, dialectic and rhetoric). He does this to highlight the uneducated state of the first witnesses to the resurrection. How could such nobodies overcome this major obstacle blocking the success of their message of the resurrection? 'If many noble, eminent, and learned people', Augustine argues, 'had reported that they saw this [the resurrection and ascension of Christ] happen', it 'would be no wonder that the world believed them; in fact it would be perverse to refuse to believe witnesses such as these'. But what 'if – and this is the truth of the matter – the world believed a few obscure men of no importance and no learning who reported in speech and writing what they had seen'? Their proclamation of the resurrection

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 500–1; emphasis added. Augustine ignores such educated early Christians as Paul and Luke to concentrate on those whom we know to have been fishermen: Peter, James and John. 'All those fish of every kind' may echo a scene in which Peter and 'the sons of Zebedee' (John 21:2) feature: the astonishing catch of 153 great fish (John 21:11), which could symbolise the church coming to include in one unbroken net people of all kinds. Or it may echo a parable of the kingdom in which a net thrown into the sea gathers fish 'of every kind' (Matt 13:47). On the possible symbolic meanings, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (XIII–XXI)* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 174–5.

is all the more believable for having prevailed despite such massive difficulties.

The *means* (a ‘tiny number of obscure, unimportant, unlearned men’) are not, from a human point of view, proportionate to the *effect*: ‘the resurrection of Christ and his ascension into heaven with the flesh in which he rose again’ being ‘believed the whole world over’. It can only be ‘divinity’ that ‘has made itself even more miraculously convincing by using such contemptible witnesses’. ‘Miraculously’ will introduce a new theme in Augustine’s argument that addresses ‘those few who remain so persistent and obstinate in not believing what the whole world now believes’ (Civ. 22.5).¹⁶ But before moving to the new theme, let me make five comments on what Augustine has so far argued.

First, I added emphasis above to ‘saw’ and ‘seen’ to bring out how Augustine relies here on eye-witness testimony.¹⁷ Elsewhere he can seem to privilege touching the risen Christ over seeing the risen Christ. In a sermon probably preached in 411, he comments on the invitation to touch him that Jesus made to a group of his disciples and to Thomas, in Luke 24:19 and John 20:27, respectively: ‘they felt and handled the solidity of his body, since it wasn’t enough for some of them to see what they remembered, unless they could also touch what they saw’ (Sermon 361.8).¹⁸ In a sermon preached in either 417 or 418, Augustine likewise argues that the evidence of seeing would not have been enough: ‘it would have been insufficient to present himself to the eyes for seeing, if he hadn’t also offered himself to the hands for touching’ (Sermon 229J.1).¹⁹ In *The City of God* Augustine states simply that, for the disciples to recognise him, the risen Christ ‘showed the marks of the wounds for them to touch’ (Civ. 22.19).²⁰ Like many earlier and later commentators, Augustine slips over the fact that neither John nor Luke report that Thomas and the other disciples, respectively, took up Jesus’ invitation and actually touched him. In any case, where Augustine privileges touching over seeing the risen Christ, he shows himself at odds with the New Testament witness. There the disciples’ decisive experience of the risen

¹⁶ *City of God* XI–XXII, p. 501; emphasis added.

¹⁷ The New Testament, while twice picturing the disciples as seeing the ascension (Luke 24:50–1; Acts 1:6–11), never alleges that anyone saw the event of the resurrection itself. Augustine’s language about the first Christian witnesses having ‘seen’ the resurrection is shorthand for their having seen the risen Christ when, after the resurrection, he took the initiative of ‘appearing’ to them or letting them see him.

¹⁸ *Sermons* (230–72), p. 230.

¹⁹ *Sermons* (184–229Z), p. 304.

²⁰ *City of God* XI–XXII, p. 530.

Christ is presented as *seeing him*. The language of seeing clearly predominates over any touching and, for that matter, any hearing the risen Christ.²¹

Second, in the third century Origen had already argued for the truth of Christ's resurrection by underlining an observable fact that had to be explained. Despite being proclaimed by uneducated men, the good news of Christ's resurrection spread throughout the world and, against all odds, seemed to be prevailing. In Origen's words, 'Jesus' apostles . . . succeeded in bringing many to obey the word of God by divine power. For in them there was no [human] power of speaking or of giving an ordered narrative by the standards of Greek dialectical or rhetorical arts which convinced their hearers.'²²

Even more than Origen, Augustine pressed the point and added, as we saw above, that, if 'many noble, eminent, and learned people' had testified to their experience of Christ's resurrection and ascension, it would have been 'perverse to refuse to believe' such witnesses. Granted that the testimony of many such people would have been more weighty than any testimony coming from a few, uneducated persons, nevertheless, the message of the resurrection in any case looked astonishing and questionable, especially as it asked its hearers to change their lives dramatically. Should one agree with Augustine and label as 'perverse' those who, at least initially, might refuse to believe testimony in favour of the resurrection coming from 'many noble, eminent, and learned people'?

Third, Augustine's argument from an observable *effect* (wide acceptance of the faith in Christ's resurrection, despite its being proclaimed by incompetent people from the margins of society) to the only adequate *cause* (the effective truth of that resurrection) should be strengthened. It is not simply that the human resources of the first disciples cannot explain the highly successful propagation of the Easter message. The fate of Jesus himself had created problems that, human speaking, were unsurmountable. The public of the day understood his crucifixion as the execution of a criminal who died banished from the divine presence, cursed by God and in the place and company of irreligious men (Gal 3:13; Heb 13:12–13). To honour anyone who perished in that way was an awful and profound scandal (1 Cor 1:23). We cannot explain *either* how the disciples themselves came to believe in such

²¹ See G. O'Collins, 'The Appearances of the Risen Christ: A Lexical-Exegetical Examination of St Paul and Other Witnesses', *Irish Theological Quarterly* 79 (2014), p. 136.

²² Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 1.62, trans. Henry Chadwick, rev. edn (Cambridge: CUP, 1965), p. 57.

a person as their risen Lord and Saviour or how their proclamation of him enjoyed such a striking success, unless Jesus was truly raised from the dead.

Thus Augustine's argument from the observable effects in the history of Christianity to their only adequate and plausible cause (the resurrection) needs to incorporate the shocking and counter-intuitive nature of what they proclaimed. God had raised to glorious, eternal life someone who had died as a criminal rejected by the religious authorities of his time and apparently cursed by God as a blasphemer. What the crucifixion meant made the message of Christ's resurrection extraordinarily implausible. That God raised to new life someone who had died by crucifixion, by any human reckoning, could not possibly be true. That this message came to be widely accepted was, in Augustine's language, simply 'incredible'. To be sure, now and then in his sermons Augustine introduced the relevant texts from Paul, 1 Corinthians 1:23 ('Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles') and Galatians 3:13 ('Christ became a curse').²³ But he expounded the texts in other ways and never pressed them into service to argue that, despite it seeming utterly implausible to Jews and Gentiles, the message about God raising the crucified Jesus had been widely accepted.

Fourth, Augustine's argument from a demonstrable effect to the resurrection being the only adequate cause that can account for this effect has continued under different forms in modern times.²⁴ Without using the term, Augustine and others appeal here to a 'moral miracle', which can be described as follows: 'an observable phenomenon that so differs from or exceeds the capacity of natural factors in a situation that the human mind recognises a special divine intervention'.²⁵ Claiming a moral miracle involves pointing to a visible phenomenon that arose in the past and continues verifiably in the present and evaluating the factors that might have contributed to (or dramatically hindered) the emergence and continuance of such a phenomenon – in our case, wide acceptance of the truth of the crucified Christ's resurrection from the dead. The utter disgrace of the crucifixion, along with the ignorance and incompetence of those who first proclaimed this resurrection, made such an acceptance humanly impossible.

²³ On 1 Cor 1:23, see *Serm.* 150.2 and 174.3 (*Sermons* (148–183), trans. Edmund Hill (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1992), pp. 30–1, 259–60; and *Serm.* 240.5 (*Sermons* (230–272B), pp. 67–8; see also *Civ.* 10.28 (*City of God* XI–XXII, p. 338). On Gal 3:13, see *Serm.* 88.8 (*Sermons* (51–94), trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), p. 424; and *Serm.* 377.1 (*Sermons* (341–400), trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995), p. 351.

²⁴ See O'Collins, *Easter Faith*, pp. 39–43.

²⁵ See Stephen Edward Donlon, 'Miracle, Moral', in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 9, 2nd edn (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2003), p. 658.

Fifth, as we saw above, Augustine cites eye-witness testimony to appearances of the risen Christ. But he does not follow Origen in taking up any objections against Mary Magdalene, Peter and other witnesses, as if it were through ‘wishful thinking’, ‘hallucination’ or even hysteria that they were deluded into thinking they saw Jesus risen from the dead.²⁶ In modern times innumerable writers on the resurrection have discussed at length the nature and veracity of the Easter appearances (to individuals and groups) reported in the New Testament. But, unlike Origen, Augustine does not raise these issues, except for what we have noted about his arguing that touching the risen Christ provided the disciples with more certain evidence than merely seeing him.

A second, related ‘omission’ in Augustine’s historical ‘apology’ for the resurrection concerns the discovery of Jesus’ empty tomb. Did Mary Magdalene, alone (John 20:1–2) or with at least one other female companion (as in the Easter narratives of Mark, Matthew and Luke), truly find the tomb to be open and empty on the third day? Modern debates about this question have proved endless. But the question does not concern Augustine. He simply accepts that two men (Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus) buried Jesus and that Mary Magdalene, alone or with other women, discovered the tomb to be open and empty. He speaks about the tomb of Jesus when he takes up Romans 6:4 and preaches about his congregation sharing sacramentally in Christ’s death, burial and resurrection.²⁷ Augustine’s interest in Jesus’ tomb is sacramental, not historical.

The history of miracles and martyrdom

Augustine’s full case for the credibility of Christ’s resurrection includes an appeal to miracles, both past and present. First, he presses the value of various miracles recorded in the Book of Acts: ‘those who had not seen Christ rise in the flesh and ascend with his flesh into heaven believed the men who told of seeing it, because they not only spoke of it but also performed miraculous signs’ (Civ. 22.5).²⁸ Augustine recognises that, to accept this argument, his ‘opponents’ need to ‘concede that these things actually occurred, as we read that they did’. But, ‘if they refuse to believe that Christ’s apostles really did work these miracles to convince people to believe in their preaching of Christ’s resurrection and ascension, they still leave us with one great miracle

²⁶ Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 2.55, p. 109.

²⁷ See *Serm. 229E.3 (Sermons (184–229Z))*, p. 282.

²⁸ *City of God XI–XXII*, p. 501. See Acts 2:4–11; 3:1–10; 4:22; 5:15; 9:36–41; 19:12; 20:9–12.

– that the whole world has come to believe it without any miracles at all. And that one miracle is enough for us’ (Civ. 22.5).²⁹

Nevertheless, Augustine shows himself unwilling to drop any appeal to miracles. He is convinced that in ‘the highly educated times’ when Christians began preaching the resurrection, miracles did establish the truth of that preaching. People of those days would simply have ‘mocked’ the idea of ‘the resurrection of Christ’s flesh and its ascension into heaven’ as something ‘that could not possibly be true’, if ‘the divinity of truth itself, or the truth of divinity, along with the confirming miraculous signs, had not shown both that it could take place and that in fact it had taken place’ (Civ. 22.7; emphasis added).³⁰ Augustine judges Acts and the rest of the New Testament as ‘supremely truthful books’. Hence he can confidently assert: ‘Many miracles have in fact occurred which attest to the one, great, and saving miracle of Christ’s ascension into heaven with the flesh in which he rose again’ (Civ. 22.8).³¹

Augustine reckoned also with the value of miracles in the present. A remarkable passage (Civ. 22.8) reports over twenty recent miracles, which range from someone being cured of gout to people being raised from the dead.³² Apart from one case that took place when Augustine himself was staying in Milan, all these miracles occurred near where he lived in North Africa and often in relationship with a shrine of the early martyr, St Stephen. Augustine pressed the apologetic value of the miracles by asking: ‘If the resurrection of the flesh to eternal life has not already happened in Christ and if it is not going to happen as Christ himself foretells and as the prophets foretold who foretold Christ, how is it that the dead, who were killed for the very faith that proclaims this resurrection, are able to do such wondrous things?’ Augustine answered his own question: ‘These miracles all bear witness to the faith which proclaims the resurrection of the flesh to eternal life’ (Civ. 22.9).³³ He accepted and recorded the recent miracles worked through the intercession of martyrs. Having died for their faith in the resurrection of Christ, they could still witness to this faith through the miracles associated with them (Civ. 22.9–10).³⁴

Yet, all in all, Augustine made more of the witness of martyrdom than he did of miracles. By suffering and dying for the risen Christ and in the hope

²⁹ *City of God* XI–XXII, pp. 501–2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 505.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 506.

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 505–17. Augustine’s approach to such miracles is discussed by Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, rev. edn (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 416–22.

³³ *City of God* XI–XXII, pp. 518, 519.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 518–20.

of sharing his glorious resurrection, martyrs left an inspiring example and testimony to the truth of the resurrection. Here again various predecessors had prepared the way for Augustine. Clement of Rome celebrated the suffering and martyrdom of Peter and Paul (1 *Clement*, 5).³⁵ Tertullian was at his vivid best in pointing to the powerful witness and fruitful results of those who died for their faith in the risen Christ.³⁶ Origen likewise argued that the sufferings which the Easter witnesses were ready to undergo supported the truth of what they proclaimed: '[Jesus] rose again and convinced his disciples about his resurrection, and convinced them to such an extent that they show to all men by their sufferings that they are looking for eternal life and for the resurrection which has been exemplified before them in word and deed, and [that] they deride all the troubles of life'.³⁷

Like his predecessors, Augustine showed his sense of the powerful witness coming from martyrs, specifically citing St Stephen, at whose shrines in North Africa miracles had been taking place. 'To what do all these miracles attest', Augustine asked, 'but the very faith which proclaims that Christ rose in the flesh and ascended into heaven with his flesh? For the martyrs themselves' were 'witnesses to this faith' (*Civ.* 22.9).³⁸ He respected both the truth that the martyrs proclaimed and the sufferings they endured, but honoured more their 'speaking the truth':

Let us give our belief, then, to them [the martyrs]. They both *speaking the truth* and work wonders. For in *speaking the truth* they suffered, and as a result of their suffering they are able to work wonders. And chief among the truths they spoke is the truth that Christ rose from the dead and first showed in his own flesh the immortality of the resurrection which he promised would be ours. (*Civ.* 22.10; emphasis added)³⁹

Truth is similarly prominent in the conclusion to a powerful passage in which Augustine draws together the witness of martyrs, the Old Testament prophets' intimations of what was to come, the miraculous 'works of power' that confirmed those intimations and the efficacious truth of the resurrection which persuaded 'the whole world':

³⁵ *Early Christian Writings*, pp. 25–6.

³⁶ Tertullian, *Apology*, 48–50, pp. 117–26.

³⁷ *Contra Celsum*, 2.77, p. 26. St Athanasius likewise cited the witness of Christians who 'chose to die rather than deny their faith' in the risen Christ (*On the Incarnation*, 27, trans. John Behr (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), p. 78).

³⁸ *City of God XI–XXII*, p. 518.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 520.

Despite the terror and oppositions of so many horrible persecutions, the resurrection and immortality of the flesh – first in Christ, then in the rest of us, which will follow in the new age – have been faithfully believed and fearlessly proclaimed. They were sown with the blood of the martyrs to sprout up all the more abundantly throughout the world. For the prior pronouncements of the prophets were read, manifest works of power confirmed them, and the truth – new to custom but not contrary to reason – exercised its persuasive force until the whole world, which once persecuted the truth in fury, now followed it in faith. (Civ. 22.7; emphasis added)⁴⁰

Experience and desire

Having examined the witness to Christ's resurrection (and ours) that Augustine drew from 'the outside', namely, from creation and Christian history, we turn now to the third string in his apologetic bow: the desires and experiences of the human heart on 'the inside'. In a sermon for Easter Monday (preached in 412 or 413), he highlighted something which made it possible for his audience to believe the preaching of the Easter witnesses: 'You all want to live happy lives. But what is it that makes a person's life happy? What is it that will really make you happy?' He evaluated and rejected various this-worldly stratagems for finding happiness, and expected that his hearers' experience would prompt them into sharing his conviction: a happy life 'isn't to be found here'. The sermon ended with Augustine putting into the mouth of the risen Christ the following promise:

I'm inviting you to my life, where nobody dies, where life is truly happy . . . that's where I'm inviting, to the region of the angels, to the friendship of the Father and the Holy Spirit, to the everlasting supper, to be my brothers and sisters, to be, in a word, myself. I'm inviting you to my life. (Serm. 231.4, 5)⁴¹

As a vivid and masterful preacher, Augustine knew how to appeal to human longing for happiness that can make us ready to accept Christ's resurrection and the promise it communicates.

The human hunger for happiness, with God alone as the final source of happiness, runs like a golden thread through the *City of God*. 'The one God' is the 'giver of happiness' (Civ. 4.25), 'the source of our happiness' and 'the

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 505.

⁴¹ *Sermons* (230–272B), pp. 21–2.

end of all desire' (Civ. 10.3).⁴² Augustine's masterpiece ends with a brilliant evocation of the eternal happiness of the saints who see, love and praise God (Civ. 22.30).⁴³ As a young man Augustine read *Hortensius*, a dialogue by Cicero that had a deep and lasting impact on him. (The book is lost and now known mainly through quotations found in Augustine's works.) Cicero's book, Augustine tells us, began 'from an absolutely certain starting point that no one could hesitate about: "We all certainly want to be happy"'. Augustine has no doubts about the universal search for happiness: 'that they want to be happy is something all men see in their hearts' (Trin. 13.7, 25).⁴⁴ 'Without immortality', Augustine argues, happiness simply 'cannot be', or, as he puts matters more fully: 'it is altogether impossible for a life to be genuinely happy unless it is immortal'. Through the 'gifts' of the risen and glorified Christ, 'we arrive at the supreme good of immortal happiness' (Trin. 13.10, 11, 14).⁴⁵

Centuries later Karl Rahner took a similar line in explaining and justifying Easter faith. The genesis of that faith involves not only the external historical witness coming from Christ's first disciples, but also our transcendental hope. A radical orientation towards a total and lasting fulfilment of our existence opens us up to the Easter message, Christ is risen and we will live with him forever.⁴⁶

This language may put some nerves on red alert, especially for those who recall Ludwig Feuerbach's view that belief in the resurrection is simply the projection of our hunger for the happiness of eternal life.⁴⁷ Augustine and Rahner would deserve Feuerbach's suspicion if they justified Easter faith merely in terms of subjective orientation: our hunger for full and lasting happiness (Augustine) or our dynamic, transcendental hope (Rahner). But

⁴² *The City of God I–X*, trans. William Babcock (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012), pp. 133, 308. See also Civ. 5, pref. (*City of God I–X*, p. 143), Civ. 6.12 (*City of God I–X*, p. 205), Civ. 8.5 (*City of God I–X*, p. 248), Civ. 12.21 (*City of God XI–XXII*, pp. 58–61), Civ. 13.17 (*City of God XI–XXII*, p. 83), Civ. 14.25 (*City of God XI–XXII*, pp. 133–4), Civ. 18.41 (*City of God XI–XXII*, pp. 323–5), Civ. 19.4 (*City of God XI–XXII*, pp. 354–9), and Civ. 19.20 (*City of God XI–XXII*, p. 377).

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 551–4. See John Bussanich, 'Happiness, Eudaemonism', in Fitzgerald, *Augustine through the Ages*, pp. 434–7.

⁴⁴ *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), pp. 348, 364. For the impact that *Hortensius* had on Augustine, see *The Confessions* 3.7–8, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), p. 79.

⁴⁵ *The Trinity*, pp. 351, 352, 354.

⁴⁶ K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978), pp. 268–78.

⁴⁷ See L. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), pp. 135–6, 170–84.

both Augustine and Rahner recognise the importance of external signs and evidence: the surprising spread of Christianity, accompanied by miracles and the sign of martyrdom (Augustine), and the historical witness of the apostles (Rahner). In their different ways both Augustine and Rahner maintain or at least imply that public evidence converges with personal experience and expectations in creating and sustaining Easter faith.

A cumulative case

When we put together Augustine's 'apology' for faith in the resurrection of Christ, we find various elements working together cumulatively. That faith stands in continuity with what he already accepts about God on the basis of creation and its wonders – specifically, the pattern of 'new life after death'. Augustine's 'background theory' about creation and, in particular, the creation of human beings lends credibility to resurrection faith. If nature makes resurrection believable, so too does human history: in particular, the astonishing 'moral miracle' (our term, not Augustine's) of the universal spread of Christianity and Christian faith in resurrection, despite the massive difficulty of the first witnesses being a few obscure people of no importance and no education. From a merely human point of view, it was 'incredible' that millions came to believe their testimony to what they had seen, touched and heard: Christ gloriously risen from the dead. Death by martyrdom attested the truth of their testimony, as did the miracles they worked in the lifetime and the 'modern' miracles that were taking place through their intercession.

The Easter faith that comes externally 'from hearing' (Rom 10:17) correlates existentially (our terminology) with the universal search for happiness and answers Augustine's question, 'What will make you really happy?' People 'see in their hearts' this hunger for happiness. But what of the more important, primary factor that also works 'from the inside' to produce Easter faith: the internal witness of the Holy Spirit? I quoted Augustine above on 'the divinity of truth', which 'shows' that resurrection can take place 'and has in fact taken place'. 'The divinity of truth' more than hints at 'the Spirit of truth', promised by Jesus at the Last Supper (John 14:17), a verse that Augustine quotes and associates with John 16:13 ('when the Spirit of truth comes, he will teach you all truth') (Trin. 1.18) – first of all the truth of Christ's resurrection, with all that it implies and promises.⁴⁸

Like John, the apostle Paul also stresses the role of the Holy Spirit, who 'reveals' the 'things of God' (1 Cor 2:10–13). Augustine does not neglect

⁴⁸ *The Trinity*, pp. 77–8. On the Holy Spirit according to Augustine, see Eugene TeSelle, 'Holy Spirit', in Fitzgerald, *Augustine through the Ages*, pp. 434–7.

this Pauline passage.⁴⁹ But other passages seem more relevant: for instance, God ‘shines’ in the ‘heart’ of believers so that they know ‘the glory of God on the face of [the risen] Christ’ (2 Cor 4:6).⁵⁰ Augustine picks up this verse and associates it with Ephesians 5:8 when he writes of the resurrection:

The dawn on which the Lord’s resurrection was revealed belongs to the third day; God is suggesting to us by implication that the day now takes its beginning from night – in the sense that he *told light to shine out of darkness* (2 Cor 4:6), in order that by the grace of the new covenant and a share in the resurrection of Christ we might hear it said to us, *You were once darkness, but now light in the Lord* (Eph 5:8) (Trin. 4.10).⁵¹

Elsewhere, in a long letter written in 411 or 412, Augustine attributes to the Holy Spirit this ‘light’ that replaces darkness in the heart. Apropos of Romans 5:5 (where Paul speaks of ‘the love of God poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit’), Augustine firmly links this love with light. The love infused by the Spirit is also ‘the light of the heart’ (Ep. 140.54).⁵² This light makes possible ‘an inner gazing of the heart’ (Serm. 264.2), by which believers see the risen Lord. In a sermon from 396 or 397, Augustine remarks: ‘we didn’t see him hanging on the cross, nor observe him rising from the tomb. We hold this by faith, we behold it with the eyes of the heart’ (Serm. 263.2).⁵³

Augustine clearly understood the resurrection (and ascension) of Jesus Christ to form and fashion the faith and identity of Christians. The extant works of Augustine allow us to put together his case in legitimating such Easter faith. It takes a triple form, appealing to evidence from creation, from Christian history (including miracles and martyrdom) and the inner ‘factors’ that include the human hunger for happiness and the luminous love of the Spirit who enables believers to behold their risen Lord with ‘the eyes of the heart’. Augustine knew the value of a broad apology for the resurrection. But at the end he recognised that Easter faith is a matter of a Spirit-prompted ‘seeing with the heart’.

⁴⁹ See e.g. Civ. 13.24 and 14.4 (*City of God* XI–XXII, pp. 95, 104).

⁵⁰ Paul stresses here ‘the inward phenomena’ or shining in human hearts, not the outward, luminous phenomena of the Damascus road encounter that Acts narrates three times (chs 7, 22, 26); see Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), pp. 333–7.

⁵¹ *The Trinity*, p. 160.

⁵² *Letters 100–155*, trans. Roland Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), p. 271.

⁵³ *Sermons* (230–272B), pp. 220, 227.