

Saint Augustine and the experience of God

Jaime García Alvarez

Encountering God hinges upon the capacity to pay attention, which is to know how to listen, hence, to open ourselves to other people and things.

Introduction

Saint Augustine's constant effort, both in his life and in his thought, was to identify himself with Christ. For him, Christ was the life and the truth. And since we truly live only to the extent that our life is identified with Christ the life, and we are in the truth only to the extent that our thought is identified with Christ the truth, Saint Augustine never regarded his thought as his private property. His sole desire was to be faithful to the truth, that is, the Christian faith, and to identify himself with Christ who is the truth. On the other hand, Augustine considered himself to be a life-long seeker of the truth. He was fully convinced that in this life we will never obtain the fullness of this truth. Perfect conformity or identification with Christ is a gift received in the next life. Consequently, he recognized an evolution both in his life and in his thought. He thus asks us always to read him in the light of this evolution. It is his wish, in other words, that we never hold as certainly true [*cierto*] what he himself thought to be dubious or even false:

But of course I do not want anyone to adopt my opinions except when he and I are certain of their truth. Which explains why I am now working on

the books of my *Reconsiderations* [*Retractationes*], so that my readers may see that not even I always follow myself, for by God's mercy I believe that I have made some progress in the truth since I began to write. After all, I did not begin by being perfect, nor even now, at my advanced age, would I cease to be more arrogant than truthful if I said that I wrote without any possibility of error. But it is extremely useful to know how much and on what points you err and how easily you accept correction or with what stubborn obstinacy you try to defend your error. There is great hope for the man who keeps making progress in the knowledge of the truth until the last day of his life so that, adding progress to progress, he may be judged worthy of attaining perfection and not of being punished.¹

It is true that Augustine tried to be as faithful as possible to Holy Scripture and to the teaching of the Church. Nevertheless, his interpretation of the Christian faith, as well as his way of living it, was deeply marked by the experience of his conversion. This conversion is the "place" [*lugar*] from which Augustine thinks and speaks. It is the hermeneutical key to his life and to his thought. It thus becomes absolutely necessary to be acquainted with Augustine's conversion if we wish to enter into the multiple aspects or facets of his thought.

The experience of God in Augustine's conversion

In his nineteenth year, Augustine, like many young men of his time, was pursuing a program of studies with the aim of taking over a position of responsibility in the government. At that moment, he had in mind a chair of rhetoric. During the course of his studies, he was obliged to read and comment upon Cicero's *Hortensius*. The reading of this book made such an impression on him that he decided to change the direction of his life. The *Hortensius* opened to him the prospect of Wisdom and, together with Wisdom, of true happiness. But at that time, Jesus Christ was presented in catechesis above all as the Wisdom of God. Augustine, who had been formed in this catechesis by his mother Monica and by the Church of Tagaste, thus identified the Wisdom held out to him by the *Hortensius* with Jesus Christ. He also turned to Holy Scripture, and at that point had the first experience of his conversion, an experience that was to remain ever present as he went back to the Bible again and again throughout his life.

At the moment we are considering, he read and meditated on Scripture, but treated it like any other book he was

¹*De dono perseverantiae*, 21, 55; PL 45:1027-28.

studying at the time, which is to say that he paid more attention to the beauty of its literary style and to the precision of its arguments than to the content of its ideas. Approaching the Bible from this perspective, Augustine found it utterly incomprehensible. The language spoken in Scripture was very different from the language of rhetoric. The Bible contained no hint of power and control, and its language was one of gift, gratuitousness and grace. For his part, Augustine understood only the language of efficiency and power, the language of will. Holy Scripture does, of course, offer us Wisdom, but always as something that we receive, that puts itself into our hands [*se entrega*], that is to say, as a present from God.

The truth is that in Scripture it is not man who seeks God, but rather God who seeks man; only those find God who let themselves be found by him. The language of Scripture is the language of God's love for man, whereas Augustine understood nothing but the language of will and of power. He wished to possess Wisdom, but in the way that one possesses any other object. He could not quite realize that Wisdom demanded that he let himself be possessed by *it*. So, as he would tell us later, he dropped the Bible:

I am speaking to you, I who, deluded as I once was (I was still a young man), thought I could approach God's Scriptures with the bumptiousness of someone looking for a dispute rather than with the piety of the humble inquirer. . . . I dared to search, filled with pride, for what you cannot find except from a position of humility . . . I, wretch that I was, believing that I was already able to fly, left the nest behind and, before I flew, fell to the ground.²

This initial experience would forever mark Augustine's approach to the Word of God. His conversion would be, from that moment on, a conversion to love. To understand Scripture was to understand love and the conditions of love.

Having thus failed to gain access to Scripture, Augustine joined the Manichees. This sect, which was extremely lively in Carthage, presented itself to him under the guise of a Christianity for the cultivated, of a technical, rational Christianity requiring neither faith nor grace. The Manichees offered him a new way to get at Wisdom that fully conformed to his tastes and demands. It would be a personal path on which one did not have to accept or receive anything from anybody. A path on

²*Sermones*, 51, 6; PL 38:336-37.

which one attained to the truth by one's own effort and reason: "You know, Honoratus, that we joined the circle of the Manichees and fell into their clutches for this reason: they promised, while putting aside the odious testimony of authority, to lead to God, by a strictly rational exercise, as many of us as would put themselves submissively in their hands, thus liberating us from error."³

Consequently, Manichaeism was presented to Augustine as a self-deification of man. There was nothing in this world worthy of admiration; everything was an object to be possessed and controlled. Wisdom was not something one contemplated or listened to, but an object one possessed or attempted to possess. Augustine joined Manichaeism, taking rationalism to its most extreme consequences. It was necessary, so he thought, to set off in search of Wisdom without any prior assumptions. Yet the Manichees, despite their promises, required Augustine to accept quite a few principles that he had not discovered on his own. He thus came to feel deluded and disappointed. This second experience would likewise leave its mark on his entire life. There is no presuppositionless philosophy. Loving is not something that starts with man and is rooted in him, but is already a response to a prior [*anterior*] love. A man loves based on a prior experience of being loved. God has loved us first (1 Jn 4:19). Anyone who does not feel or experience in himself the love that God has for him will never love. Augustine's entire spirituality would be marked by this experience. Speaking is a response to hearing. He who does not know how to listen will never know how to speak.

Duped by Manichaeism, Augustine entered into a state of uncertainty and doubt. At no point would he doubt the existence of Wisdom, but he did question the possibility of finding a path that would enable us to reach it. At this stage, Augustine came into contact with the Academic philosophers, who offered him a new concept of Wisdom based on their identification of Wisdom with the search for it. The search was an end in itself. Wisdom was a perfectly ordered search: the self-enjoyment of one's own reason. To seek, the Academics said, was not to seek anything in particular, but to take pleasure in the search itself. It follows that the wise man is not the one who lives in and from the truth, but the one who knows how to order his own reason

³*De utilitate credendi*, 1, 2; PL 32:66.

in the right way. What was interesting was not the object sought, but the search itself: "Because what you called wisdom was not the truth itself, but the road that leads to it. Therefore, he who makes use of this road, makes use of wisdom itself; and he who makes use of wisdom itself will perforce be wise; therefore, he will be wise who searches well for the truth, even if he does not obtain it."⁴ With that, Augustine became increasingly closed in upon himself. To think was to think oneself. Augustine put to death all true dialogue, all communication. He became his own center. Later, Augustine would look upon this attitude as the clearest expression of the nature of sin, in particular, of pride. His Christian experience, moreover, would be a cleansing from precisely this mentality, which prevented him from discovering the other, and, along with the other, God: "The only way to enter into truth is through charity."⁵

Augustine then went to Milan, where he joined the circle of Platonic philosophers and read some of their writings. This reading, like the reading of the *Hortensius* before it, opened up to him a new method for gaining access to Wisdom. Wisdom, as he would read in these books, inhabits the deepest part of man, and it is there, in man's inmost heart, that it is necessary to find it. For man to know wisdom, therefore, requires that he know himself. This is the method of interiority:

Refrain from pouring yourself outside; enter inside yourself, because truth resides in the inner man; and, if you should find that your nature is mutable, transcend yourself, but do not forget that, in soaring above the heights of your being, you are elevating yourself above your reason-endowed soul. Direct, then, your steps towards the place whence the light of reason is ignited.⁶

Augustine would put this method of interiority into practice, trying to test its truth in himself. At this point, his experience revealed to him a fact of supreme importance. In gathering himself together into concentration upon himself, he felt and experienced a kind of force of attraction that dragged him beyond himself. He felt that it was not he who drew close to Wisdom by his own will power, but that it was Wisdom itself which attracted him to itself. The path that leads us to Wisdom was not, consequently, an ascent but an assumption: "*enraptured by you,*" as

⁴*Contra academicos*, 1, 5, 14; PL 32:913.

⁵*Contra Faustum manichaeum*, 32, 18; PL 42:507.

⁶*De vera religione*, 39, 72; PL 34:154.

Augustine would say over and over again. This experience caused Augustine to observe that the contemplation of Wisdom was not something we obtain by our own strength, but was rather a gift, a present given to us; that only those who are disposed to receive and welcome wisdom will come to it. From that moment on, Augustine was fully aware that we are not the ones who go towards Wisdom, but that it is Wisdom that comes towards us. We are not the ones who hold fast the truth, it is the truth that holds us fast. Wisdom is not an object of conquest, but of donation. And those who receive and welcome wisdom live, therefore, in an attitude of permanent thankfulness.

But Wisdom is not a "something" that is given or received. Rather, it is "Someone" who comes to us. First Ambrose, then Simplicianus, would help Augustine to make this discovery, the discovery of Wisdom as a person.

Saint Ambrose, by his teaching and his example, showed Augustine that Wisdom is not something that we take or possess, but rather "Someone" who offers, gives and hands himself over to us. Wisdom is not far from us, but reveals itself to us through Holy Scripture and authentically Christian persons, as well as through every event of life and history. Everything is and is meant to be a word of Wisdom for us. Welcoming it is, above all, a matter of knowing how to listen to it. And Ambrose taught Augustine, the rhetor, not to talk, but to listen and, above all, to listen to the word of Wisdom.

It was Simplicianus who suggested that Augustine read the Gospel of Saint John and the Letters of Saint Paul. And in this reading, Augustine discovered that Wisdom is the Word of God, and that the Word of God is Christ. Augustine had discovered the mystery of the Incarnation. It was precisely this encounter that finally brought about his conversion. There was something about the mystery of the Incarnation that moved him in the very depths of his being—the humility of God: "All these things entered my bowels in marvelous ways as I read the least of your Apostles and considered your works, and I felt frightened, beside myself."⁷

Augustine had never stopped believing in God or in Jesus Christ as God's Wisdom. His faith in God had remained constant throughout the ups and downs of his life. But for him God was a distant being dwelling outside of and beyond the uni-

⁷*Confessiones*, 7, 21, 27; PL 40:426.

verse. To his amazement, it was this God who now made himself small and humble, like us in all things. Augustine felt deeply moved before this divine humility, all the more because humility is the expression of love. Humility is first and foremost "disponibility" [*disponibilidad*], listening, putting oneself at the service of others. He is humble who truly knows how to love: "It is love that makes God humble."⁸ God abases himself to reach man. Hence, only those who know what it is to love, to surrender themselves, and to make a gift of themselves will be able to experience God. This would likewise prove to be one of the deepest experiences of Augustine's conversion: "He who knows the truth, knows this light, and he who knows the light knows eternity. Charity is what knows it."⁹

But if the Word of God comes to us, he does so in order to lead us towards himself, to make us sharers in his life. Through the mystery of the Incarnation, Christ reveals to us the path that leads to him, the true Wisdom:

I had been seeking how to acquire the strength that would enable me to enjoy you, but I could find it only by clinging to the Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who is above all things, God blessed forever. He calls to us and tells us "I am the way, the truth and the life." He mixes food with his flesh, which at that time I felt unable to swallow, because your Word became flesh. He did this so that your Wisdom, by which you created all things, would be changed into milk for our infancy. Since I wasn't humble, I couldn't get it into my head that this humble Jesus was my God. Neither did I understand what his weakness could be master of. Your Word, eternal truth, while being far above the highest parts of creation, raises up to it those who are below.¹⁰

Augustine, in the light of this experience of his conversion, would never cease to meditate on the mystery of the Incarnation. This mystery would become the center of his theological reflection.

To identify ourselves with Christ, to follow Christ, is to identify ourselves with his deepest mode of life [*vivencia*]: humility. Humility would be for Augustine the path that allows us to welcome God into our life. At the same time, we must not forget that humility is the expression of charity. Charity and humility, the foundation of the mystery of the Incarnation, are thus the two fundamental virtues of the Christian life:

⁸*De virginitate*, 37, 38; PL 40:426.

⁹*Confessiones*, 7, 10, 16; PL 32:724.

¹⁰*Confessiones*, 7, 18, 24; PL 32:745.

God is on top, let the Christian go down. If you want the one who is on top to come close to you, humble yourself. These are great mysteries, brothers. God is above all things; you exalt yourself and you don't touch him; you humble yourself and he comes down to you.¹¹

Augustine lived his conversion first and foremost as a conversion to humility. Conversion opens our heart to God so that we may welcome him, and it is precisely humility that prepares a home for God in the heart. Humility revealed to Augustine something the philosophers were ignorant of. For they did not know how to receive welcomingly [*acoger*] and thus did not know how to give thanks. Augustine himself had followed this philosophical path for many years and for all his searching succeeded in finding only himself. Now Augustine was able to discover the true reality of God; he experienced God at the very moment that he discovered in Christ the mystery of the Incarnation.

The experience of God in the community of the Church

Augustine's conversion, however, cannot be reduced solely and exclusively to his encounter with Christ. His experience of God had not been an encounter in the solitude of his own self. It is true that cognition [*conocer*] is connaturality [*co-nacer*: "to be born with"], that to know is to become what we know. God is one, and knowing God requires, for this very reason, a unified heart that is simple and cleansed of all multiplicity: "If we desire to cling to and be one with God our Lord, we have to be single and simple, that is to say, lovers of eternity and humility, and to remove ourselves from the multitude and crowd of beings that are born and die."¹² Moreover, poverty and humility are the absolutely indispensable means for unifying the heart:

You can't love the eternal unless you stop loving the temporal. Think about it: man's love is, as they say, the hand of the soul. If he's holding onto one thing, he can't lay hold of something else. So if he wants to take what is given to him, he has to let go of what he's grabbing onto. Here's a clearer way of putting it: He who loves the world can't love God; his hand is already filled. God is saying to him, "Take hold of what I'm giving you." If he doesn't want to let go of what he's holding, he can't receive what he's being offered. Does this mean that no one's supposed to possess anything? If a man can, if that's what perfection calls for, then let him give up everything; but if he can't do it because some unavoidable necessity prevents him, then let

¹¹*Enarrationes in psalmos*, 33, 2, 23; PL 36:3209.

¹²*Enarrationes in psalmos*, 4, 10; PL 36:83.

him possess, but let him not be possessed; let him have, but not be had; let him be the lord of his estate, not its slave. . . . What does it mean to say "don't love what you possess in this world"? It means don't encumber that love by which you can tend to God and cling to the one who created you.¹³

Yet even though Augustine once entertained the wish to withdraw into solitude in order to live exclusively for God, he immediately discovered the social or communitarian dimension of the experience of God: "Terrified by my sins and by the weight of my wretchedness, I had planned within myself to flee into solitude. But you prevented me and encouraged me with these words: Christ died for all so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for the one who died for them."¹⁴ To be sure, our whole life has to be a constant search for God, but we come to know God only through his manifestations, the most perfect of which is Christ. Christ is the Word made flesh (Jn 1:14), who "reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature" (Heb 1:3). Christ is both the path by which God draws close to us and the path that we must take to draw close to him. Christ is not far away from us, but stands at our side, making himself present in the Church. Christ and the Church are one and the same reality. Christ and the Church are the "*total Christ*." The Church is the body of Christ, the form through which Christ makes himself present in our midst today:

As far as I have been able to discern in the pages of Scripture, brothers, Christ our Lord is considered and named in three ways when he is proclaimed both in the law and the prophets as well as in the apostles' letters or in the events (worthy of our faith) that we know through the gospel. The first of them, which precedes his assumption of flesh, is insofar as he is God and refers to his divinity, which is equal to and coeternal with the Father's. The second refers to the time when he had already assumed flesh, inasmuch as we read and understand that the same [person] who is God is man and the same [person] who is man is God, according to a certain property of his sublimity whereby he is not put on the same level as other men, but is the mediator and head of the Church. The third way is what in a certain sense we call the total Christ, in the fullness of his Church, that is to say, head and body, according to the fullness of a certain perfect man, of whom we are members, each one in particular.¹⁵

It follows that the Church is the presence of Christ in our midst. But for Augustine the Church is not an abstract re-

¹³*Sermones* 125, 7; PL 38:694.

¹⁴*Confessiones*, 10, 43, 70; PL 32:808.

¹⁵*Sermones*, 341, 1; PL 39:1493.

ality; it becomes present in each one of the different communities, and does so to the extent that these are animated by charity. The ecclesial community is a miniature Church in which God becomes present. In order to experience God, it is necessary to experience Christ, but we experience Christ through experiencing the Church, the ecclesial community. We experience Christ by being living members of the Church:

So let us congratulate ourselves and be grateful; we have been made to become not only Christians, but Christ himself. Do you realize, brothers, what God has done? It is something to fill you with amazement and joy. We have been made to become Christ himself. Because if he is the head and we are the members, the whole man is he and we.¹⁶

The Church is not an abstract reality, but the gathering of believers insofar as they are united by the Holy Spirit. In the same way that the soul vivifies the body, the Spirit vivifies the members of the Church. The Church is therefore the work of the Holy Spirit. The Church is communion. And the one who unites the different members, forming them into a single body, is the Holy Spirit. The very same thing the Holy Spirit effects in the mystery of the Trinity—the union, or communion, between the Father and the Son—he realizes in the heart of the Church with each and all of its members:

What the soul is with respect to man's body, the Holy Spirit is with respect to the body of Christ which is the Church. The Holy Spirit works in the Church the same thing that the soul works in all the members of a single body. . . . Therefore, if you want to get life from the Holy Spirit, maintain charity, love the truth, and desire unity in order to reach eternity.¹⁷

Charity, then, is the clearest expression that one belongs to the body of Christ. It is, in truth, the health of the Church: "In the members of Christ, charity is the same as health in the members of the body."¹⁸ The more the Holy Spirit dwells in the lives of the faithful, the more they belong to the Church. Moreover, the criterion for ascertaining whether the Spirit dwells in the believers is precisely the degree of charity and peace by which they remain united amongst themselves: "We too receive the Holy Spirit if we love the Church and if we are united by charity and enjoy the Catholic name and faith. Let us

¹⁶*In Johannis evangelium*, 21, 8; PL 35:1568.

¹⁷*Sermones*, 267, 4; PL 38:1231.

¹⁸*Sermones*, 162A, 6; PL 46:889.

believe this to be so, brothers; to the degree that someone loves the Church, to the same degree he possesses the Holy Spirit."¹⁹

As we have seen, to experience God requires experiencing Christ. We cannot have direct and immediate access to God. "No one comes to the Father, but by me" (Jn 14:6); "The Son of God who is the very truth has put the truth on a level with us by becoming man."²⁰ Furthermore, Christ makes himself available to us today through the Church. The upshot of all this is that it is in the Church that we have a clear experience of God. The experience of the Church leads us to the experience of Christ, and the experience of Christ opens us to the experience of God. But to experience the Church is to experience charity. The Church is made of charity: "In order to see if what refers to Christ also refers to us and is said of us, let us question our conscience and examine our love."²¹ For Augustine, love, charity, is the privileged locus wherein the experience of God becomes a reality. He never ceases underscoring this theme in his writings, which are nothing more than an extended commentary on Saint John's words: "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God remains in him" (1 Jn 4:16). The experience of true love makes us feel God:

You may tell me, "I don't see God." But can you tell me, "I don't see man"? Love your brother. If you love the brother whom you see, at the same time you'll see God, because you'll see charity itself, and God dwells inside.²²

This experience of love introduces us into the very mystery of the Trinity. For Augustine, then, the analysis of love is the entry way into the mystery of the Trinity: "We noticed how the immaterial and incomprehensible nature of God can, as far as is possible, be understood . . . by charity, which in the Holy Scriptures is God, and in which the image of the Trinity began to be discernible, in the lover, the beloved and love."²³

Love is, in the first place, disponibility [*disponibilidad*]. For this very reason it is also a shift of one's center away from oneself. It is gift—gift of oneself to others. Someone who loves never pays attention to himself. He does not seek to con-

¹⁹In *Johannis evangelium*, 32, 8; PL 35:1645-46.

²⁰*De civitate Dei*, XI, 2; PL 41:318.

²¹*Enarrationes in psalmos*, 64, 7; PL 36:779.

²²In *epistulas Johannis*, 5, 7; PL 35:2016. See also *Enarrationes in psalmos*, 99, 5; PL 37:1292-93.

²³*De Trinitate*, 15, 3, 5; PL 42:1060. See also, *De Trinitate*, 8, 8, 12; PL 42:957.

template himself. To contemplate oneself is to make oneself one's own center of attention. For the same reason it means that the reality of self-gift and of self-surrender is lacking. Love is like a ray of light, which never stops to contemplate or admire itself, but is always directed towards the other in order to illumine it, so that the other can reveal and manifest itself as it is. This is precisely the effect of love. Love is essentially gift. It fills us with light, but does so while simultaneously filling others with light.

But to love is not just to give oneself to the exclusion of anything else, for it is also to know how to receive, to know how to listen. Listening, moreover, is the capacity to be present before the other, leaving him all the space he needs to manifest himself. The silence of the listener is an offered, given silence. Listening is a kind of creation, because in listening to someone we allow him to be himself, we collaborate in the revelation of who he is. Augustine never tires of saying that God's being is revealed only in love. Only the true lover experiences and feels God; only someone who knows what love is knows God.

Experiencing God in meditation on Holy Scripture

At the same time, Augustine offers us another path leading to the experience of God: meditation on Holy Scripture. For him, Holy Scripture is first of all the Word [*Palabra*] of God; not just any word, however, but God's *Verbum*, the Second Person of the Trinity. Access to Sacred Scripture is access to the Son. By the same token, it is entrance into the mystery of the Trinity. The Word [*Verbo*] of God becomes man in the mystery of the incarnate Christ. Likewise, Holy Scripture is, in a certain sense, an incarnation of this Word [*Verbo*], for in Scripture the Word [*Verbo*] of God becomes word [*palabra*]; he becomes language so that all men can understand him. The reading and meditation of Scripture therefore offer us a certain "vision" or experience of God:

Remember that, since there is a single discourse of God prolonged throughout the whole of Scripture, and since there resounds a single Word [*Palabra*] through the mouths of many saints, if he is in the beginning God in God, he lacks syllables, because he lacks time. Nor should this surprise us, because, due to our weakness, he descended to the articulation of our spoken words [*voces*] when he came down to take the weakness of our body.²⁴

For Augustine, Sacred Scripture is both an "example" and a "sacrament." As an "example," it is a mirror in which

we must contemplate our life. It reveals to us not only what we are, but likewise what we are to be. Scripture is not a book of scientific knowledge, but a book of life, and we have to know how to find ourselves in it:

And what do I have to look at to see myself? God gave you the mirror of Scripture. There we read "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." In this reading the mirror has been placed before your eyes. See if you are what you say you are; if you still are not, groan so that you may be. The mirror shows you your face. As you see that the mirror doesn't flatter you, don't flatter yourself either. It shows you the beauty you have, see how you look, and, if the sight displeases you, try not to be that way.²⁵

But Scripture is not just an "example" or a "mirror"; it is above all a "sacrament," in that it reveals God to us and introduces us into his mystery. To receive Holy Scripture is much more than to read or hear it, but is above all to obey it, to let ourselves be transformed by it. Hence the need to meditate upon the Word of God, which we are not to approach with the sole aim of finding out some fact or historical event, but in order to listen to God. To meditate on Scripture is to identify with it, indeed, to let our heart be transformed by love, because God is love, and his word is nothing but a word of love: "The essence and the end of God's Scripture is the love of the God we are to enjoy and of all that can enjoy him together with us."²⁶

The experience of God in the contemplation of the world

In Augustine we find a third path leading to the experience of God: the path of beauty or of contemplation of the world. Augustine sees everything—things, people and events—as a word addressed to us by God, as God's invitation (*admonitio*) to love him: "Heaven, earth and all that is in them are telling me on all sides to love you. And they never cease telling everyone this, so that no one has any possible excuse."²⁷

Everything speaks to us of God and is a sign and word of God. God has indeed created all things, but to create is not simply to make things once and for all, nor is creation an action that God performed once, but one that he continues to per-

²⁴*Enarrationes in psalmos*, 103, 4, 1; PL 37:1378.

²⁵*Enarrationes in psalmos*, 103, 1, 4; PL 37:1338.

²⁶*De doctrina christiana*, I, 35; PL 34:34. Meditation on Scripture likewise introduces us into the experience of Christ: See also *In Johannis evangelium*, 9, 3; PL 35:1469.

form, as he holds and upholds us in his hand. This is why Augustine likes to pray, "God, nothing exists above you, nothing outside of you, nothing without you. Everything is under your command, everything is in you, everything is with you."²⁸ It follows that all things express relation to God. Things, like the events surrounding us, never hold us back from God, but constantly point us towards him. They are no more than signs, and the sign, when it is a good one, never holds us back, but refers to what it signifies. To approach things is to hear their voice saying to us:

"Don't stop with us." I asked the earth and it answered me thus: "It is not I." All the things that are found in it made the same confession. I asked the sea, the deeps and the crawling things endowed with a living soul, and they answered, "we are not your God. Look for him above us." . . . Then I turned to the things surrounding the gates of my flesh. "Speak to me of my God," I said, "since you are not he. Tell me something about him." And they cried to me with a loud voice, "He is the one who made us." My question was my gaze; their response was their beauty.²⁹

Augustine welcomingly receives [*acoge*] all sensuous experience as a call [*admonitio*] from God to fix our attention on him. The contemplation of the world thus challenges us to learn how to decipher or discern the divine meaning of its reality and its events.

The first condition for realizing this experience of God is silence, but a silence that opens us up to the events that take place. It is an attentive silence: "My question was my attention."³⁰ Encountering God hinges upon this capacity to pay attention, which is to know how to listen, hence, to open ourselves to other people and things. To listen is to be sensitive to the presence of a person or thing, to be able to welcome and receive. This is the root of the difficulty in contemplating the universe. We are sunk so deeply in work and in the quest for success that we do not see people or things in the light of what they are, but in the light of their utility and efficiency. Everything is our tool. We lack the sense of presence, of mystery, which is to say that we do not know how to marvel. To take in the true reality of what surrounds us is to know how to marvel at what it

²⁷*Confessiones*, 10, 6, 8; PL 32:782-83.

²⁸*Soliloquia*, I, 1, 4; PL 32:871.

²⁹*Confessiones*, 10, 6, 9; PL 32:783. See also *Sermones*, 241, 2; PL 38:1124.

³⁰*Confessiones*, 10, 6, 9; PL 32:783.

is: "Its answer was its beauty." And Augustine asks himself: "Do we love something that is not beautiful? And what is beautiful? What is beauty? What is it that attracts and fascinates us in the things that we love?"³¹

We marvel when we are in the presence of beauty: the splendor of what we contemplate possesses us and impels us to manifest our admiration. We make ourselves into a word, a song, an expression of what enchants and amazes us. A song of praise breaks forth from our lips: "You are great, O Lord, and greatly to be praised! Great is your power and your wisdom is measureless!"³²

But at the same time we recognize that we are extremely far from God. His glory dazzles us and brings to light our poverty and nullity: "And man desires to praise you, a particle of your creation. The very man who carries his mortality around him, who bears the mark of his sin and the witness that you resist the proud."³³ Moses, before the revelation of God in the burning bush, "hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God" (Ex 3:6); Peter, having witnessed the miraculous draught of fish, says to Jesus: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man" (Lk 5:8). The Prophet Isaiah, faced with the revelation of God's glory, exclaims: "Woe is me! For I am lost for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts" (Is 6:5). Yet fear and distance from God are not the sole effect of this experience of God. God makes himself present to Augustine above all as the one who is worthy of admiration and adoration. Augustine feels fascinated by the presence of God, by his goodness and beauty: "Who can understand this? Who could be capable of describing it? What is it that directs its sparks toward me and which strikes my heart without wounding it? I feel invaded by fear and ardor. With fear insofar as I am unlike God. With ardor inasmuch as I am like him."³⁴

Augustine offers us perhaps the clearest expression of this experience of God through the contemplation of the universe in the so called "ecstasy of Ostia." Finding themselves looking out over a garden of their house, Augustine and Monica carry on a supremely intimate dialogue:

³¹*Confessiones*, 4, 13, 20; PL 32:701.

³²*Confessiones*, 1, 1, 1; PL 32:659-60.

³³*Confessiones*, 1, 1, 1; PL 32:660-61.

³⁴*Confessiones*, 7, 10, 16; PL 32:724.

Forgetting the past and straining forward towards the realities that we had before us, we searched together, in the presence of the truth that you are, what the eternal life of the saints was going to be, the eternal life that neither eye has seen nor ear has heard nor has it entered into the heart of man. We eagerly opened the mouth of our hearts to the lofty jet of your fountain, of the fountain of life that is in you, so that, sprinkled by it as far as we were able, we could in a certain way imagine such a marvelous reality.³⁵

And in the midst of this dialogue they have no other desire than that all things keep silence, so that they may no longer to hear anything but the very voice of God. Augustine and Monica finally go beyond themselves in order to experience the Word of God. They touch the Word of God himself with their heart, and they speak to him, not with words, but with the gift of their souls, with the total and absolute surrender of their lives: "While we were talking and sighing for it, we came to touch it a little with all the impetus of our heart, and as we sighed, we captured there the first fruits of the spirit."³⁶

Contemplation is much more than a dialogue with words. It is a dialogue of life in which God gives himself to us and we give ourselves to him. For Augustine, contemplation is a reliving of the mystery of the Trinity in the depths of the heart; it is a participation in the dialogue between the Father and the Son in the love and intimacy of the Holy Spirit. This contemplation of God attains its fullness in heaven. Augustine tells us that "There we shall rest and we shall see; we shall see and we shall love; we shall love and we shall praise. This is what will happen in that end without end."³⁷

The communication of the experience of God

Experiencing God in this way, Augustine becomes a song of praise. We cannot keep for ourselves what we experience in the inmost depths of our heart. To praise and adore is to acknowledge that God is God, to let God take possession of us. The experience of God surpasses every word and every concept. If we try to say or express it, we lose it. "Who do you think God is? How do you think he is? Whatever you can imagine is not he. Whatever you understood with your mind is not he. If it were

³⁵*Confessiones*, 9, 10, 23; PL 32:774.

³⁶*Confessiones*, 9, 10, 25; PL 32:774.

³⁷*De civitate Dei*, 22, 30, 5; PL 41:804.

he, it couldn't be understood. But that you may have a little taste, God is love."³⁸

There is, then, no precise correspondence between what God is and our words. We lack the words to say and express God. The only expression worthy of God is silence. Yet it is not the silence of one who has nothing to say, but the silence of one who has so much to say that every word is an impoverishment. God's light is too bright for our intelligence. The experience of God shows us the immense distance that exists between him and us. Augustine has no small difficulty when he tries to communicate to us his experience of God:

It also happens to me that my words almost always displease me. I aspire to another and better language, which I sometimes enjoy interiorly, before starting the verbal explanation; and when I realize that everything is less than my thought, I am filled with sadness that my tongue cannot follow my heart. I want those who are listening to me to understand everything that I understand, and it pains me that my words are incapable of bringing this off. For intuition bathes the soul with light, as if in a sudden flash of lightning; but words are slow and not very faithful; and while they unfold, the rest has disappeared.³⁹

The only really valid expression for communicating the experience of God is, for Augustine, the song of praise.

God reveals himself as gift through everything that surrounds us. We see reality truly when we consider it as something that gives itself to us and surrenders itself to us because it loves us. Love is the hermeneutical key to reality. But the expression of love is song, the song of joy and praise: "The lover sings."⁴⁰ "Singing is a function of joy, and if we consider it attentively, a function of love. He who knows how to love the new life knows how to sing the new song."⁴¹ Augustine carries out an extremely precise and profound analysis of how we express God and, for that reason, of how we express the experience of God:

He who jubilates does not utter words, but utters a certain wordless sound of joy. Jubilation is a sound of the soul engulfed in joy, which, as far as it can, makes its affection known, but not the feeling that perceives it. When man jubilates with this rejoicing, but cannot explain or make his affection

³⁸*Sermones*, 21, 2; PL 38:143.

³⁹*De catechizandis rudibus*, 2, 3; PL 40:311.

⁴⁰*Sermones*, 336, 1; PL 38:1472.

⁴¹*Sermones*, 34, 1; PL 38:210.

understood with words, he emits a certain wordless sound of joy. In this way he manifests by the sound itself that he rejoices; but since he finds himself filled by the excess of joy he cannot explain the jubilation with words. . . . Then, when will we jubilate? When we praise what cannot be declared with words.⁴²

Conclusion

The experience of God underlies all of Augustine's writings. If we read his thought leaving that experience on the margins, it becomes impossible to understand. The experience of God gives life and warmth to everything that he writes. Augustine's is not a cold, antiseptic word in which the only thing that counts is formal precision and correct argumentation. Rather, his word is the expression of what he lives and experiences. He himself tells us that "the voice of the heart is the understanding."⁴³ And the heart is God's dwelling, the place where God is perceived. For this reason, Augustine invites us to enter into his own experience of God if we really desire to understand what he wishes to tell us:

Give me a loving heart and it will feel what I am saying. Give me a heart that desires and is hungry; give me a heart that looks at itself like an exile, that is thirsty, that longs for the fountain of the eternal homeland. Give me a heart like this and it will realize perfectly what I am saying. But if I speak with a heart that is totally frozen, it won't understand my language.⁴⁴—*Translated by Adrian Walker* □

⁴²*Enarrationes in psalmos*, 99, 4-5; PL 37:1272.

⁴³*Enarrationes in psalmos*, 99, 3; PL 37:1271.

⁴⁴*In Johannis evangelium*, 26, 4; PL 35:1908.