

Paul and Augustine's Retrospective Self: The Relevance of *Epistula XXII*

In the celebrated conversion scene in *Confessions* 8.12.29 Augustine mentions Paul's admonitions in *Romans* 13.13-14 as the text which provided the final scriptural warrant for his renunciation of the world. In the scene that follows, Augustine's friend Alypius takes the subsequent verse, *Romans* 14.1, as his summons to follow in Augustine's steps. It has been something of a puzzle that for all its importance to Augustine, *Romans* 13.13-14 scarcely appears in Augustine's works prior to the *Confessions*. That paucity makes Augustine's use of *Romans* 13.13-14 in one of his early letters (*Ep.* XXII) not only curious but critical for an assessment of what he made of this passage outside of the narrative context of the famous conversion scene in *Confessions* 8.12.28-30. Given all the controversy that has often surrounded Augustine's conversion to Catholic Christianity in 386, the significance of *Letter 22*¹ can hardly be overestimated.

I. – RECENT APPROACHES

Most studies of Augustine's conversion scene have been remarkably silent about *Letter 22*.² R. J. O'Connell hardly mentions *Letter 22* in his discussion of Augustine's conversion scene, though he is keen to point out how the themes Augustine found in Paul's text lent themselves to Augustine's difficulties and the

1. For Augustine's letters I have adopted the following English translation. *Saint Augustine: Letters*, vol. 1, trans. Sister Wilfrid Parsons. The Fathers of the Church, vol. 12 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1951). Henceforth FC 12.

2. J. J. O'DONNELL, *Augustine: Confessions*, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3: p. 67.

resolution of his problems.³ George Lawless, on the other hand, acknowledges the significance of Augustine's use of *Romans* 13.13-14 in *Letter 22*, but seems to disengage *Letter 22* from the later narrative provided in *Confessions* 8.12.29.⁴ Lawless believes that the use of *Romans* 13.13-14 in *Letter 22* is more apposite than its use in the famous conversion scene.⁵ Exactly what this means to the conversion scene is not spelled out.

One of the most suggestive recent studies on Augustine's conversion is Paula Fredriksen's "Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Traditions, and the Retrospective Self."⁶ Fredriksen does not mention *Letter 22*, nor does she pose the question of Augustine's specific use of *Romans* 13.13-14 in describing the climax of his conversion. What Fredriksen proposes is a general theory about what Augustine did in fashioning his conversion narrative. Her argument, in fact, seems to be less about Augustine than about Paul. Fredriksen takes the relationship between the Paul described in *Acts* and the Paul of *Galatians* as analogous to Augustine's early statements about his conversion in the Cassiciacum dialogues and his much later rendition of his conversion in the *Confessions*. Luke's account in *Acts* is to Paul's first person narratives in his letters what Augustine's Cassiciacum dialogues are to the *Confessions*.

Fredriksen devotes most of her argument (pp. 3-20) to her analysis of the Paul of *Acts* and *Galatians*, and devotes a few pages on proving the comparable part on Augustine, with the third section of the paper given to showing what the later tradition has made of Paul, partly because of Augustine's influence.⁷ Without getting into the details of the construction that Augustine's conversion is what gives the "orthodox" interpretation its love of Luke's Paul, it should be enough to point out that the idea of conversion in the Christian tradition after Augustine may not accord with what Fredriksen proposes. Further, monastic culture, in particular the Benedictine tradition that came after Augustine, engendered an entirely different idea of conversion. The model here was neither Augustine's personal narrative in the *Confessions*, nor even the Pauline narrative in *Acts* which Fredriksen claims Augustine's *Confessions* helped to establish as the orthodox tradition.⁸ Certainly, Augustine did much to shape the later reception of Paul because of how much he used Paul, especially in the Pelagian controversy of his later years. But this is a much different view than the one Fredriksen

3. R. J. O'CONNELL, *Images of Conversion in Augustine's Confessions* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), pp. 215-227.

4. George LAWLESS, *Augustine of Hippo and His Monastic Rule* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), pp. 14-28.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

6. Paula FREDRIKSEN, "Paul and Augustine: Conversion Narratives, Orthodox Traditions, and the Retrospective Self," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 37 (1986), pp. 3-34.

7. Fredriksen's view has been taken up by Stanley K. STOWERS, *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 1-4.

8. Paula FREDRIKSEN, "Paul and Augustine," pp. 5-6.

suggests, that because Augustine interpreted his conversion along the lines of Paul's story in *Acts* the later Christian tradition came to read Paul through the eyes of Augustine.

In any case, the more central issue is what we make of Augustine's two narratives, the conversion accounts in his early writings and the one he provides in the *Confessions*. According to Fredriksen, the account we find in the *Confessions* "is a theological reinterpretation of a past event, an attempt to render his past coherent to his present self. It is, in fact, a disguised description of where he stands in the present as much as an ostensible description of what occurred in the past. And he constructs his description from his reading of *Acts* 9 as well as from his new theological convictions."⁹ In fact, the claim that the *Confessions* represents a new theological perspective is not a modern discovery. It is Augustine himself who alerts his readers to this in his *Retractationes* and elsewhere.¹⁰ But Augustine nowhere claims as the inspiration for his conversion scene Fredriksen's argument that Augustine "constructs his description from his reading of *Acts* 9." In this Fredriksen is closer to the work of Leo C. Ferrari than to Augustine himself.¹¹

Ferrari has offered probably the most trenchant attempts to date to make sense of Augustine's seeming indifference to *Romans* 13.13-14 in the works prior to the *Confessions*. Ferrari argues that the Pauline passage evoked little in Augustine prior to his writing of the *Confessions*, so the famous conversion scene must be a fabrication. I have dealt with Ferrari's elaborate arguments in more detail elsewhere.¹² A brief summary should suffice here. In one of his many articles on the subject, Ferrari writes that in spite of the mention of *Romans* 13.13-14 in *Letter* 22, it does not contribute much to the discussion of Augustine's use of Paul in the conversion scene. To say that Ferrari misses an important opportunity would be an understatement. For there is nowhere else in Augustine's early writings prior to the *Confessions* where one would find Augustine mentioning

9. Paula FREDRIKSEN, "Paul and Augustine," p. 24.

10. *Retractationes* 2.1; *De dono perseverantiae* 20.53.

11. Although Fredriksen protests against Ferrari's view, her seemingly moderate approach does not resolve the inherent problems. On this, see Leo C. FERRARI, "Augustine's 'Discovery' of Paul (Confessions 7.21.27)," *Augustinian Studies* 22 (1991), pp. 37-61. Reference is to pp. 56-57 n. 30. Ferrari's earlier articles on the subject are as follows: "Paul at the Conversion of St. Augustine (Conf. VIII, 12, 29-30)," *Augustinian Studies* 11 (1980), pp. 5-20; "Saint Augustine on the Road to Damascus," *Augustinian Studies* 13 (1982), pp. 151-170; "An Analysis of Augustine's Conversional Reading (Conf. 8.12,29)," *Augustinian Studies* 18 (1987), pp. 30-51; "Saint Augustine's Conversion Scene: The End of A Modern Debate?" *Studia Patristica* 22 (1989), pp. 235-250; "Truth and Augustine's Conversion Scene," *Collectanea Augustiniana* 1990, pp. 9-19; "Beyond Augustine's Conversion Scene," in *Augustine: From Rhetor to Theologian*, ed. Joanne McWilliam (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), pp. 97-107.

12. F.B.A. ASIEDU, "Memory, Truth, and Representation at Augustine's Conversion Scene," forthcoming in *Augustiniana*.

Alypius' life of renunciation and *Romans* 13.13-14 together. This juxtaposition could hardly be incidental. After all, at the conversion scene in Milan we find Alypius, Augustine, and a reading of *Romans* 13.13-14.

Augustine also spends a good deal of the letter describing the life of the Catholic Church in Italy and what differences obtained between the Italians and the Africans. This suggests that Augustine had much of his Milanese experience in the background of his thoughts as he wrote *Letter 22*. That Augustine should turn to *Romans* 13.13-14, of all of the passages in the biblical corpus, as encapsulating so much that needed to be dealt with in reforming the life of African Christianity in the 390s may not have been a happenstance. Of course, once we know the narrative he provides in *Confessions* 8.12.29-30 it is clear why Augustine turns to *Romans* 13.13-14. But first the context and circumstances leading up to the writing of *Letter 22* need to be described.

II. – THE BACKGROUND TO *LETTER 22*

The letter is addressed to Aurelius, bishop of Carthage. Augustine does not say where he is at the moment of writing the letter, though it is almost certain he is not at Hippo. For he concludes the letter with a statement about a certain mistrust that may have entered into his relationship with the church in Hippo. Augustine indicates that he has long been away from Hippo, and writes concerning the effect his absence (*absentiam meam*) is having on the people of Hippo, who are in a great deal of distress about it and seem to fear the worst. They are afraid and not a little anxious (*uehementer nimisque formidant*). Augustine mentions that as a result of his absence the people of Hippo are not nearly as ready to trust him as he is to trust Aurelius (*mihi sic uolunt credere ut et ego uobis*). Augustine may have been at Thagaste, back at the quasi-monastic community he had founded there on the remnants of his father's estate.

When he wrote the previous *Letter 21* to Valerius, Augustine was clearly at some remove from Hippo. Why he left Hippo is not clear. J. J. O'Donnell has recently suggested that Augustine may have fled and found refuge in Thagaste. O'Donnell surmises that once Augustine recovered his senses he realized what a terrible thing he had done. To assuage the concerns of those at Hippo, including Valerius who had counted on Augustine, Augustine wrote a most politic letter to Valerius, part explaining himself and part attempting to repent of his ways.¹³

The subtext is this: seized and ordained a priest at Hippo, Augustine's natural impulse had been to flee, and he followed that impulse back to Thagaste. Once there, regretting his choice, perhaps fearing divine retribution, he wrote the letter

13. J. J. O'DONNELL, "Three Studies in Augustinian Biography," <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine/nwlife.html>.

to his bishop (to whom he would not have need to write this request if both were in Hippo, and if there were no reason for a public declaration about his whereabouts and activities), putting a good face on what he has done and thus implicitly promising to return. And return he did, to become the Augustine of history. It could have been otherwise.¹⁴

This is a tantalizing possibility, given how little Augustine provides of his motives and the reference to the extreme anxiety of the people of Hippo, as well as the potential or real mistrust engendered by his absence to which Augustine alludes.

I will suggest another possibility. As Augustine points out in *Sermon 355*, he arrived at Hippo in 391 on a personal mission. He had assumed that because Hippo already had a bishop in Valerius there would be no problem with him coming and going as he pleased. This is acknowledgment that Augustine was already quite conscious of his standing among Catholics. He already had a reputation. He miscalculated, however. For once in the confines of the Catholic Church in Hippo he would be forced into the priest's office, amidst his protestations and tears, tears which were misconstrued as his disappointment at being chosen for so lowly an office as a priest in so provincial a place as Hippo. On both counts, Augustine maintains that the congregation was mistaken.

Could Augustine have left Hippo unceremoniously soon after this? Maybe, but not very likely. It would have fueled speculation that Augustine did not want to honor the people's choice. Augustine states in *Sermon 355* that at the time he was enlisted into the priesthood at Hippo he had nothing with him except the clothes on his back. The action of the Catholics at Hippo had implications not only for Augustine himself but also for his nascent community at Thagaste. In which case, the people of Hippo and Valerius should have expected Augustine to return to Thagaste to settle his affairs. Only then could Augustine resume the role into which he had been so forcibly conscripted. Augustine's attachment to that nascent community should not be overlooked. Augustine had once written to his good friend Nebridius that he was unwilling to leave his community at Thagaste to come to Carthage to live with him.¹⁵ Augustine pointed out that "there are friends here who could not come with me, and whom I should think it shameful to desert. You can live agreeably in your own mind, but it is doubtful that they can do the same."¹⁶

So, at the very least, Augustine would have to make arrangements for someone to take over the affairs of the community so that he could return to Hippo to take on his new duties as priest. Augustine's absence from Hippo, in and of itself, may not have been the problem. Rather, it is the duration of his stay away from Hippo which would likely have prompted the extreme anxiety he alludes to

14. J. J. O'DONNELL, "Three Studies in Augustinian Biography."

15. AUGUSTINE, *Ep. X.1* (CSEL 34¹, 22-23). FC 12, p. 23.

16. AUGUSTINE, *Ep. X.1* (CSEL 34¹, 23). FC 12, p. 24.

in his letter to Aurelius (*Ep.* XXII). The longer Augustine stayed away from Hippo, the more likely would be speculation as to why he was away. Given the circumstances of his forced ordination, such speculation would undoubtedly have turned on his possible desertion. Under these circumstances nothing could assuage the anxieties of the people of Hippo except for Augustine's visible presence among them. In *Letter* 21, Augustine had already implored Valerius for much needed time to prepare himself for his duties as priest. Ostensibly, Augustine construed his prolonged stay as somehow consistent with the leave that had been granted.

Valerius may have communicated Augustine's desire for study to the Catholic congregation at Hippo. For one noted for his learning, the expressed desire for more time to study might be deemed by a less charitable audience as nothing more than polite indifference to the lowliness of the people to whom Augustine now found himself bound by priestly vows.

The pastoral logic of Augustine's letter to Valerius seems to remove the hint of scandal, though it does not preclude the possibility that his letter to Valerius reflects Augustine's reconsidered judgment on the events surrounding his induction into the priesthood. For better or for worse, Augustine construed his forced ordination as part punishment, correction and rebuke – all reasons why he should be given time for study and preparation for the work that lay ahead of him. As he puts it: "If God did this, not as a punishment, but out of mercy – which I earnestly hope, now that I know my weakness – then I ought to study all His remedies in the Scriptures, and by praying and reading, so to act that strength sufficient for such perilous duties may be granted to my soul."¹⁷ Augustine claims that this is precisely what he wanted to do soon after his ordination: "I did not do this before, because I did not have time, but, as soon as I was ordained, I planned to use all my leisure time in studying the Sacred Scriptures, and I tried to arrange to have leisure for this duty."¹⁸ But he claims to have been frustrated in this.

If Augustine is to be believed here, his plea to Valerius would have to be construed along the following lines. Having accepted his forced ordination, Augustine tried to use what little leisure he had for scriptural studies. He realized he needed more time. This suggests that Augustine remained at Hippo for at least a short while after his ordination, and only when he found that he had little time to prepare for his new duties did he return to Thagaste. An alternative would be that Augustine had, in fact, left for Thagaste with the intention of returning soon to take up his duties. While at Thagaste he realized that he had not made any headway in his study of scripture and needed more time. The first scenario depends on the assumption that Augustine remained at Hippo without returning to Thagaste to settle his affairs until later. The second prospect seems

17. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXI.3 (CSEL 34¹, 51). FC 12, p. 49.

18. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXI.3 (CSEL 34¹, 51). FC 12, p. 49.

more likely: that in returning to settle his affairs Augustine had meant to use what little leisure he had to study scripture only to discover he needed more time than he had projected.

Now, still away from Hippo, he was writing for more time to ensure that he was adequately prepared: "Truly, I did not know what I needed for such a task, but now I am tormented and weighed down by it."¹⁹ Exactly what Augustine thought he needed in the way of preparation is not stated. Nor can we be certain what he thought of the office of the priest or bishop prior to his ordination. What is certain is that he deemed his previous activities as an apologist, controversialist, philosophical inquirer, and student of scripture as nowhere near adequate for his new duties. In any event, by the time of his letter to Valerius he was well towards forming a view of what his new duties required of him.

Augustine himself knew well that his protestations could be swept away by simply being reminded that he was setting too high a standard for his preparedness for his new vocation, and that his claim of unpreparedness was a strange mixture of false modesty and dereliction of duty. What more did the accomplished rhetorician recently converted to his childhood faith need in order to serve the humble Catholic community of Hippo? "Perhaps your Holiness may say: I should like to know what is lacking to your training?" Augustine himself counterposes. He responds that "so much is lacking that I could more easily tell what I have than what I lack."²⁰ And so he asks for more time. He is very specific: "For this purpose I wanted the brethren to secure for me from your most sincere and venerable Charity, a little time (*paruum tempus*), at least until Easter (*usque ad pascha*), and this I myself ask."²¹

This would mean Easter 392, if Augustine had already been ordained in Easter 391. What he had attempted to do through others Augustine was now doing personally in this letter. By the time Augustine wrote *Letter 22* to Aurelius of Carthage, he was well into his extended period of study away from Hippo. This period of concentrated study lent itself to Augustine's continued reflections not only about the pastoral vocation, but also about the nature of his own pilgrimage from the confines of the Catholic church of his childhood to Manichaean religion and back to Catholic Christianity, after his many years of philosophical apprenticeship initiated by his reading of Cicero's *Hortensius* in his nineteenth year (*Confessions* 3.4.7).

It would have been difficult for Valerius to turn down Augustine's request for time, given the apocalyptic tones Augustine evoked about the kind of judgment likely to befall the unprepared servant who did not tend the field left to his care. Augustine asked Valerius pointedly:

19. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXI.3 (CSEL 34¹, 51). FC 12, p. 49.

20. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXI.4 (CSEL 34¹, 52). FC 12, p. 49.

21. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXI.4 (CSEL 34¹, 52). FC 12, pp. 49-50.

What answer am I to make to the Lord Judge? – that I was not able to seek because I was prevented by the cares of the church? ... Tell me, I beg you, what am I to answer? Do you want me, perhaps, to say: 'Valerius, who is old, believed that I was well instructed in all this, and, because he loved me so much, he would not allow me to study?'²²

Augustine continued:

Give heed to all this, venerable Valerius, I beseech you, by the goodness and severity of Christ, by His mercy and His judgment, by Him who has breathed into you as great a love for me that I dare not offend you, even for the saving of my soul.²³

Augustine was far from posturing. Valerius could not agree with Augustine's pastoral theology and turn him down at the same time. What Augustine would subsequently write to Aurelius of Carthage in *Letter 22* reveals an individual who had developed a clear sense of his pastoral vocation and had indeed given serious thought to the life of the church into whose priestly cast he had only recently been inducted.

It is well to note at this point that because Valerius apparently granted Augustine's wish for a time away for study, Augustine would be writing *Letter 22* to Aurelius before his return to Hippo in Easter 392 (as he had requested in *Letter 21*) to take on his pastoral duties. Although we have no extant letters from either Aurelius to Augustine or vice versa prior to *Letter 22*, they may have been in contact almost immediately upon Augustine's arrival in Africa in 388.

III. – AUGUSTINE, ALYPIUS, AND THE CIRCLE OF AURELIUS OF CARTHAGE

The group of men who, together with Augustine bound themselves as *servi Dei* in Rome in 388, established a bond with Aurelius of Carthage when they arrived in Africa. Carthage, after all, was their first stop on their way to Thagaste. Augustine, his son Adeodatus, Evodius, and Alypius formed the nucleus of the new community at Thagaste. Only a year after their return, Augustine would complain that his ill-health had limited his travels, making a trip to Carthage and back a severe strain (*Ep. X*). The shorter distance between Thagaste and Hippo may have made Augustine's visit in 391 more tolerable. His health also seems to have improved considerably by then. In any event, we do not hear Augustine making any references to it in his letter to Valerius, requesting time for study.

22. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXI.5 (CSEL 34¹, 52-53). FC 12, p. 50.

23. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXI.6 (CSEL 34¹, 53). FC 12, pp. 50-51.

Among the advantages of having a year away from Hippo in the company of his friends at Thagaste was the opportunity it afforded Augustine to think through just what was happening to him. He would have ample time to review his past, dwell on his hopes for a life of study in monastic retreat with other like-minded individuals, as well as contemplate the prospects that lay ahead of him. Some of these elements are evident in *Letter 22*. And for the first time in his writings prior to the *Confessions*, we find Augustine commenting on *Romans* 13.13-14, the passage he claims to have effected his dramatic conversion in a garden in Milan in 386. That Augustine also mentions Alypius's life of renunciation and recalls the patterns of Christian spirituality he found in Italy all conspire to suggest that Augustine has much of his conversion experience in mind as he writes *Letter 22*. If one already knows the story as it is later recounted so dramatically in *Confessions* 8.12.29-30 one can begin to appreciate the critical importance of *Letter 22* for Augustine's biography.

Augustine presents himself in several guises to Aurelius. First, as a friend who counts on Aurelius's prayers as Aurelius counts on Augustine's in their common life before God. Second, as an ascetic living in community with his fellow ascetics who are the beneficiaries of Aurelius's pastoral care and oversight. And third, Augustine presents himself as a fellow pastor in the service of the church who cannot help but be concerned about the state of the African church. He speaks of his eager expectation of receiving Aurelius's letters and the readiness with which he wants to answer.

Augustine's opening paragraph alludes to letters he has received from Aurelius, though these are not extant. There is reason to believe that Augustine had remained in regular contact with Aurelius since he returned to Africa in 388. Now that he has been conscripted into the vocation into which Aurelius already served, he counts even more on their friendship. Augustine speaks of their "mutual zeal for the Lord and the care of the church" (*nostrum studio in domino et cura ecclesiastica*).²⁴ He is delighted too that Aurelius had written that he was helped by Augustine's prayers, and Augustine expresses the wish that if the Lord will not hear his prayers, the Lord will hear Aurelius's in any case.

Augustine then proceeds to mention Alypius in a context that both highlights Alypius's manner of life and the important role Aurelius somehow plays in the nascent monastic community at Thagaste. Augustine writes: "there are no words to express my thanks to you for so kindly allowing Brother Alypius to remain in our company as an example to the brethren, who wish to shun the cares of this world. May God repay you."²⁵ Why Augustine thanks Aurelius in this regard is not immediately obvious, unless one takes into account the following facts.

Although Aurelius was not yet a bishop when Augustine returned to Carthage in 388, he seems to have gathered around himself a number of deeply pious and

24. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.1.1 (CSEL 34¹, 54). FC 12, p. 51.

25. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.1.1 (CSEL 34¹, 55). FC 12, pp. 51-52.

charitable individuals who offered their homes to such self-professed servants of God (*serui Dei*) as Augustine and Alypius. *De ciuitate Dei* 22.8 contains a description of what Augustine and Alypius witnessed in the house of one Innocentius, during those early days upon their return to Africa. Augustine's description paints a picture of a closely-knit circle of friends which included one Aurelius of Carthage and one Saturninus, at that time the bishop of Uzalis. In the course of *Letter 22*, Augustine mentions Saturninus as a much beloved and highly esteemed brother, whose visit to Thagaste would be much appreciated, and would be received as if it were a visit by Aurelius himself. It appears, then, that when Augustine and Alypius and their fellow servants of God arrived in Carthage on their way to Thagaste in 388 they placed themselves under Aurelius's oversight.

This presents an interesting question as to just how long Augustine, Alypius, and the company of men who gathered around them could remain outside the office of the priesthood. To suggest that Augustine was inadvertently set on the road to becoming bishop may be an overstatement. But the company he cultivated by virtue of his contacts with Aurelius may well have set him on that path, to saying nothing of his self-designation as a *seruus Dei*.²⁶

Augustine's expression of gratitude to Aurelius for allowing Alypius to remain with the brothers at Thagaste underscores Aurelius's implicit authority over the community at Thagaste. "The whole community of brothers which is beginning to gather around them is devoted to you with such loyalty that, though we be scattered into the most distant places, your direction guides us as if you were present in spirit."²⁷ The loyalty of which Augustine speaks had already been in place before Aurelius became bishop in 391. That loyalty was also an expression of the bonds of Christian community and spiritual pilgrimage that broke the bounds of anything Augustine had learned as a Neoplatonist. When Augustine returned to Africa he had already made up his mind that he was going into the service of God. How that would work itself out remained unclear. That the future remained unclear, however, did not place any doubts as to the deliberate choice entailed in the self-professed designation of *seruus Dei*. To have acknowledged Aurelius's oversight and spiritual counsel was also to indicate the direction Augustine and his friends intended to proceed, Augustine's philosophical interests and proclivities notwithstanding.

Now that Augustine was a priest the sense of loyalty he felt towards Aurelius deepened. To make his point, Augustine turned to *Romans* 13.13-14. He used this Pauline text not only to discuss the state of the African church, its need for reform, but also the state of Augustine's own soul and the sort of remedies he longed for to cure his own ailments. The juxtaposition of Augustine's self and

26. Cf. Peter BROWN, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 132-137.

27. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.1.1 (CSEL 34¹, 55). FC 12, p. 52.

the future of the African church is highly suggestive. For one thing, it anticipates Augustine's much later description of the climax of his conversion experience in the garden at Milan narrated in *Confessions* 8.12.29-30. And for another, Augustine alludes to having discussed *Romans* 13.13-14 at a previous time with Aurelius, as we shall see shortly. Before examining what Augustine says concerning the African church and the current state of his own soul, however, it is well to consider at this point the allusions to his Milanese past.

As I have already indicated, Augustine arrived in Carthage in 388 and quickly entered into Aurelius's friendship and into the friendship of that group of devout Catholic souls who had gathered around the deacon who would become the future bishop of Carthage. Augustine had left Carthage a few years before as a slightly disillusioned Manichee, searching for worldly acclaim and success in his career as a rhetorician. He would return as a self-confessed *servus Dei*, having attained all that his budding career had accorded him. If Augustine had made the acquaintance of Aurelius in his days as a student and teacher in Carthage he does not say, and there is little reason to suspect that he had. As a teacher in the city among a people who prized a literary education as the Roman Africans did,²⁸ Aurelius would probably have known Augustine. Whether Aurelius would also have known him as a Manichaean apologist is difficult to say.

But even if Aurelius knew nothing of Augustine's religious sensibilities prior to his departure for Rome in 383, the Augustine who returned to Carthage in 388 would have had some explaining to do. Augustine would have had to explain himself to those who knew him or were acquainted with him in any way. He would have had to explain what had transpired to turn the budding young teacher and rhetorician into a self-described renunciate in the service of God. During the period from 370 to 383 Augustine had spent almost all his time in Carthage. The brief interruption came when he returned to Thagaste to teach, but left soon after the death of his friend (*Confessions* 4.4.7ff.). Between Augustine's old friends and Alypius's associations there would be a representative group in Carthage for whom the sight of Augustine and Alypius would have elicited some amount of surprise and perhaps incredulity. Who goes to Rome and returns empty-handed when he doesn't have to? To those who knew him as a brilliant student and successful teacher Augustine would have had to explain why he no longer plied his trade. And to those who knew Augustine the Manichaean Augustine would have had to explain why he was no longer a Manichee and was now a confirmed Catholic. In short, both Augustine and Alypius would have had to provide the bare outlines of a "conversion" narrative for those old friends and acquaintances who would have wondered what had happened to

28. Peter BROWN, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 65-69. Cf. Robert A. KASTER, *Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 117-118, p. 126.

them. But did Augustine tell his story along the exact lines he came to tell it later in the *Confessions*? There are few hints.

There is a social reality too that Augustine could not have overlooked. Neither Augustine nor Alypius could enter into the social graces of those devout souls gathered around Aurelius without those new friends learning something of what had brought the two aspiring young men to their current manner of life. In and around Carthage Augustine and Alypius would also have some interaction with Nebridius, the friend who had followed Augustine to Milan just to live in his company and continue their life of philosophical inquiry together (*Confessions* 6.10.17). Why Augustine and Alypius did not stay with Nebridius when they arrived in Carthage in 388 and were rather received in the home of Innocentius (*De ciuitate Dei* 22.8) is unclear.

Nebridius is not mentioned as part of the circle of friends (*Confessions* 9.8.17) who bonded themselves to be part of a community as they were on their way from Rome to Africa, probably because at the time of their departure Nebridius was not yet converted. His conversion and baptism most likely came after their return to Africa. It did not come immediately in the early days of Augustine's post-conversion period, even though Augustine thought he was very close to it and could have done so (*Confessions* 9.3.6). But it happened soon enough. As Augustine puts it, "soon after my conversion and regeneration by baptism, he too became a baptized believer. He was serving you with perfect chastity and continence among his own people in Africa, and through him his entire household became Christian, when you released him from bodily life" (*Confessions* 9.3.6).²⁹

Augustine's correspondence with Nebridius does not yield easily in providing details of the change in Nebridius that Augustine describes. The year after their return to Africa seems the most likely date for Nebridius's conversion and baptism. There may perhaps be some indication of this in the transition from the "ardent inquirer after truth" to "baptized believer" in Augustine's *Letter* 6 (c. 389).

While Nebridius' ill-health made it nearly impossible for his desire to live together in community with Augustine to be anything more than a wish, Augustine also makes it quite plain, as we have seen already, that the brothers in Thagaste needed him more than Nebridius, who could provide for his own intellectual and spiritual development. In mentioning Alypius's example in the community in *Letter* 22, Augustine made it clear that it was essential for those gathered around him at Thagaste to have examples other than himself commending them towards the renunciation of the world, which was a prerequisite for joining the community.

Given Alypius's social relations, including no less an illustrious figure than Romanianus, the sight of the young Alypius living a life of worldly renunciation in his home town of Thagaste would be an event. That he had joined in a com-

29. *Saint Augustine: Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 158.

munity together with his friend Augustine, the accomplished rhetorician, attested to a new conception of nobility and citizenship that would have surprised a town keenly conscious of the social sensibilities of Augustine's parents and the high hopes they had held for him (*Confessions* 2.3.5). If anyone dared to ask what had happened to turn the son upon whom so much resources had been expended into a renunciate, it would not have been a misplaced question.

As he was writing *Letter 22* to Aurelius, Augustine, the *servus Dei*, was preparing himself to take on the life of priest, with the expectation that he would become bishop upon the death of Valerius. Away from Hippo, expectant and somewhat anxious about the future, Augustine attempts to reveal part of himself to Aurelius, whom he could trust in a way he believed the people of Hippo were not prepared to trust Augustine. Augustine blends elements of personal confession with his concerns about reforming the African church, and turns to *Romans* 13.13-14 with a simple but telling prefix: "the Apostle has set down briefly in one place three sorts of vices to be detested and avoided, because from them springs an unlimited crop of sins."³⁰ It reads like a personal manifesto.

IV. –THE USE OF *ROMANS* 13.13-14 IN *LETTER 22*

Augustine's choice of *Romans* 13.13-14 gives the impression that he found the passage a most fitting expression of the Christian life. But why *Romans* 13.13-14 from among all of Paul's passages? There are a plethora of passages from Paul's letters that speak to the "sorts of vices to be detested and avoided" (*genera uitiorum detestanda et uitanda*). Augustine himself alludes to *1 Corinthians* 5.11 in the course of *Letter 22* as another place where Paul enumerates several vices and adds an injunction that the Christian should not "eat" with anyone who practices any of them. So why the choice of *Romans* 13.13-14?

If Augustine did not also cite *Romans* 13.13-14 as the very one which sealed his conversion in the garden at Milan, one would have to assume that his choice of these verses in *Letter 22* had no particular significance except that it fit the particular circumstances he wanted to address in the life of the African church. This, in fact, is precisely the view put forth by Ferrari.³¹ Against such a view is the simple fact that Augustine ends up applying the passage to himself, and in the process suggests that it had a particularly personal resonance for him. And after he writes the *Confessions* it becomes clear why.

Augustine highlights both his own personal defects and the moral lapses of the African church. Augustine all but demands of Aurelius the calling of a coun-

30. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.1.2 (CSEL 34¹, 56). FC 12, p. 52.

31. Leo C. FERRARI, "Paul at the Conversion of Augustine," p. 14.

cil to deal with the indifference of the church to some of the vices mentioned in *Romans* 13.13-14, so that “by your influence the many carnal taints and weaknesses which the Church in Africa suffers in many and bewails in few” may be healed.³² Augustine reads *Romans* 13.13-14 as treble admonition about which the African church has become highly selective. The church only pays attention to part of the apostolic injunction: “not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in its concupiscences.” Augustine claims that the church already attacks one of these vices, the second in the triad, but treats the other two mentioned by Paul somewhat indifferently, and with such toleration that what the Vessel of Election (*uas electionis*) censures has come to be looked on as if it were no vice at all. When Augustine goes on to compare what obtains in the church in Africa with what he found in Italy, we must imagine that he has his Milanese experience in view, with much of that focus stayed on the period immediately preceeding and following his conversion in 386. Almost all the allusions Augustine makes here serve to highlight Augustine’s personal experiences in Milan: from Alypius’s renunciation and the exemplary nature of his life among the brothers at Thagaste to the Catholic church in Italy, and to the seemingly tolerant attitude of the churches in Africa.

In Augustine’s view the African church already deems “chambering and impurities” (*cubilia et impudicitiae*) a great offense and excludes from the sacraments anyone stained with such sin. He asks: “But, why only this one” (*sed quare solum*)? What about the rioting and drunkenness and the contention and envy? In answering this Augustine addresses both the church at large and those entrusted with the duty of overseeing the churches. He points out that pride, contention, and envy are more prevalent among “our ranks” than among the people. Rioting and drunkenness is common among the people, and so borne by many with such toleration that they are part of the festivities associated with the shrines of the martyrs.

And who that looks upon this with unworldly eyes can behold it without weeping? If it were merely sinful and not actually sacreligious, we might think it should be borne with some measure of toleration. But, what of that other saying of the same Apostle, who, after enumerating several vices, includes drunkenness, and concludes: ‘With such a one not so much as to eat?’ If we must overlook these things in the shameful luxury of those banquets which are held in private houses, if we must receive the body of Christ in company with those with whom we are forbidden to eat bread, at least let this scandal be kept away from the tombs of the saints, from the place of sacraments, from the houses of prayer. For who dares to forbid in private a practice which is called honoring the martyrs when it is done in holy places?³³

32. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.1.2 (CSEL 34¹, 55). FC 12, p. 52.

33. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.1.3 (CSEL 34¹, 56-57). FC 12, p. 53.

What the churches in Italy and elsewhere do not tolerate should not be tolerated in Africa either. Augustine's mention of the censure of holy bishops in Italy probably alludes to Ambrose, and possibly to the experience of Monnica in Milan (*Confessions* 6.2.2), when Ambrose disabused Monnica of her practice of leaving bread, cakes, and wine at the shrines of the saints, an African custom which was conducive to the drunkenness and rioting that Augustine clearly condemns here.

It is almost as if in writing *Letter 22* Augustine reaches back into his recent past for a retrospective assessment of his experience of the church, as he prepares at Thagaste for his impending obligation at Hippo. That he pondered the state of the African church and what needed to be done to reform its practices is a good indication of how seriously Augustine took his charge. That he also argued that a council held under the authority of the bishop of Carthage could do for the church in Africa what one single, local prohibition could not do, is evidence of Augustine very early recognition of the nature of ecclesiastical polity. Having Aurelius as a friend already made it relatively easy for the philosophical dilettente who called himself a *servus Dei* to write about ecclesiastical reform to the bishop of Carthage, even though Augustine was himself a priest of not more than a year, if that. Augustine easily recognized what could be accomplished under the aegis of the Bishop of Carthage, the capital of Roman Africa.

But why did Augustine appeal to Aurelius of Carthage? There are a number of reasons. First of all, Augustine seems to have become troubled by the incessant roudiness of the Catholic people of Hippo, either because he had observed it or had heard about it. And he believed that what was a problem at Hippo was not limited to that city. Secondly, he clearly understood Valerius's precarious role in trying to stamp out practices which the Africans tolerated. Augustine believed Valerius, who was not himself an African, would see the reasonableness of Augustine's concerns and would no doubt be convinced by scripture. But he doubted that Valerius could stamp out these practices in a place like Hippo.

Augustine turned his local concerns into a global one. It would be simple enough for him to persuade Valerius to insist on the reforms at Hippo. But what could this accomplish when these practices were the problems of the entire church in Africa and not just the Catholic community in Hippo? Nothing short of a council under the auspices of the see of Carthage would do.

On the other hand, if the correction is instituted by a single church, it might be considered as bold to change what the Church in Carthage holds as it would be shameless to wish to keep what the Church in Carthage has corrected. What bishop could be so desirable for a task as the one who condemned these practices while he was a mere deacon?³⁴

34. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.1.4 (CSEL 34¹, 58). FC 12, p. 54.

Augustine speaks directly to Aurelius:

What you then grieved over, you must now eradicate, not harshly, but, as it is written in the spirit of meekness and mildness. Your letters, indicative of your innate charity, embolden me to speak to you as I would to myself.³⁵

Notice that Augustine again mentions “your letters” (*litterae tuae*), alluding to a correspondence to which we are not privy. Secondly, when Augustine writes about the kind of bishop fit for effecting the very reforms he is calling for, he states that it is precisely that person who while a deacon of the church condemned the very practices Augustine is referring to. In other words, when Aurelius was a deacon he had expressed his disapproval of these practices, and Augustine knew this.

What can easily be lost sight of is that in so mentioning Aurelius’s disapproval of these African customs while a deacon Augustine touches on what he knew of Aurelius’s sensibilities and stated views on these matters in the period prior to 391 (when Aurelius became bishop). In which case, we have to assume that Augustine had already spoken to Aurelius about the very passage he uses in this letter. That is to say, *Romans* 13.13-14 was already a passage both Augustine and Aurelius had had occasion to discuss. Otherwise, Augustine could not possibly have known what Aurelius already thought about Paul’s treble admonition in *Romans* 13.13-14 and the specific injunction against “rioting and chambering.” Ostensibly, other Pauline passages could have provided occasion for Augustine and Aurelius to speak on the issues surrounding the martyrs feasts. But as I have already mentioned, Augustine’s friendship with Aurelius could not possibly have ensued without Augustine providing some kind of narrative as to why he had become a *servus Dei*. Augustine would have had to broach *Romans* 13.13-14 on at least two occasions: either when he told the story of his conversion and what led him to become a *servus Dei*, or when he had occasion to discuss the state of the African church with Aurelius in the process of which Aurelius condemned those practices Augustine mentions here in *Letter 22*.

Augustine’s view of how to eradicate the problem of drunkenness at the martyrs’ shrines reveal a touch of pastoral sensibility that is remarkable for one only recently entered into that office. “According to my way of thinking,” Augustine writes, “those abuses are not done away with by harsh or severe or autocratic measures, but by teaching rather than by commanding, by persuasion rather than by threats. This is the way to deal with the people in general, reserving severity for the sins of the few.”³⁶

And if we make threats, let it be done sorrowfully, in the words of Scripture, and in terms of punishments in the world to come. In this way, it is not we who are feared because of our power, but God because of our words. In this way, too, the

35. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.1.5 (CSEL 34¹, 58). FC 12, p. 54.

36. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.1.5 (CSEL 34¹, 58). FC 12, p. 54.

spiritual-minded, and those who are influenced by them, will be aroused; by the influence the majority of the people will be won over by very gentle but very insistent warning.³⁷

After proposing other ways of channeling the genuine goodwill of those wishing to make votive offerings to the shrines, Augustine turns to the third vice: contention and envy. He has his eyes squarely on the privileged and daunting task of the deacon, priest, and bishop. Much of what Augustine proposes in the way of a diagnosis and prescription for this malady is intended first and foremost for his own use. It is implied in almost every word he says. For one who had been made a priest by the public acclamation of the people of Hippo, Augustine could not be indifferent to this aspect of his impending public life. Public acclamation had made him a priest, but could the love of praise also prevent him from a life of authenticity?

Pride is the mother of these maladies, and so is hunger for human praise, which too often begets hypocrisy. There is no way of resisting this temptation except by instilling the fear and love of God, through frequent pondering of the Sacred Books. But, he who does this must show himself a model of patience and humility by attributing to himself less honor than is offered, neither swallowing all nor refusing all from those who honor him. What praise and honor he accepts he must receive not for himself – for he should refer all to God and despise human things – but for the sake of those whom he could not help if he were to lose dignity by too great self-depreciation. Applicable to this is the saying: 'Let no man despise the youth,' recalling that he who said that said in another place: 'If I yet please men, I should not be the servant of Christ.'³⁸

V. – INTROSPECTION AND THE UNVEILING OF THE SOUL:
ANTICIPATING THE *CONFESSIONS*?

Augustine's scriptural allusions here are motivated by a very pastoral understanding of the Apostle Paul, as his reference to *Romans* 13.13-14 and the Vessel of Election also intimate other lines of Pauline theology that circumscribe his understanding of his own renunciation. In his search for *stabilitas* Augustine can locate nowhere more dangerous than the praise that accompanies the work of an able teacher and wordsmith. "No idle saying," Augustine intones regarding *Psalms* 52.6: God scatters the bones of those that please men. Augustine goes on to lament the predicament of those who must bear this burden: "For, what is so weak, what so lacking in stability and strength – as signified by bone – as a man whom the tongue of detractors casts down, even when he knows that what is said is false? The pain of such suffering would certainly not tear the fibers of the

37. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.1.5 (CSEL 34¹, 58). FC 12, pp. 54-55.

38. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.2.7 (CSEL 34¹, 59-60). FC 12, pp. 55-56.

soul, if the love of praise had not broken the bones.”³⁹ Augustine turns introspective and addresses the bond he shares with Aurelius in the vocation of a priest. “I rely on the strength of my mind, and I share with you the things I say to myself, for you are willing, I believe, to consider with me how serious and difficult these matters are.”⁴⁰

Augustine expects Aurelius to enter into the intimacy of Augustine’s soul. The remainder of the letter turns into a confessional, because Aurelius, more than anyone else, is expected to know how Augustine must feel at this point. And even if Aurelius did not, his willingness to consider these matters seriously is reason enough for Augustine to prevail upon him. Where others less kindly disposed towards Augustine might doubt his motives, Aurelius would not. “Only he who has declared war on this enemy knows its strength, because, however easy it may be to do without praise when it is withheld, it is hard not to take pleasure in it when it is offered” Augustine observes.⁴¹

Nevertheless, our minds ought to be so fixed on God that, if we are praised undeservedly, we correct, if we can, those who praise us, either because they believe us to be what we are not, or credit us with a good that comes from God, or extol qualities which we possess or even abound in, but which are not praiseworthy, such as the benefits we have in common with animals or even with wicked men. However, if we are praised because of God, we thank those who recognize the true good, but we take no credit to ourselves for pleasing men. The condition of this, however, is that we be such before God as they believe us to be, and that the praise be referred to God, since all that is praiseworthy is His gift.⁴²

Augustine describes this sermonette on praise as an essential aspect of his daily renunciations, because in spite of his mindfulness, he finds himself still caught in this web of deceit which the praise of other mortals easily engenders. “I am often wounded in my struggles with the enemy, because I cannot always put away my pleasure in praise when it is offered.”⁴³ Augustine’s letter, then, partly addresses his own vulnerability and imperfection. He touches on his anxieties about the wholeness of his life before God and what he is yet to present to the people of Hippo, when he returns to take on his duties as priest at Easter 392 (*Ep.* XXI). He wonders whether Aurelius has any need for his meditations “either because your own reflections are better and more practical, or because you do not need this remedy.”

“But I have written,” Augustine goes on to say, “that my defects may be known to you, and that you may have good reason to deign to pray to God for

39. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.2.8 (CSEL 34¹, 60). FC 12, p. 56.

40. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.2.8 (CSEL 34¹, 60). FC 12, p. 56.

41. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.2.8 (CSEL 34¹, 60). FC 12, p. 56.

42. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.2.8 (CSEL 34¹, 60-61). FC 12, pp. 56-57.

43. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.2.8 (CSEL 34¹, 61). FC 12, p. 57.

my weakness."⁴⁴ Augustine also indicates that there is much more that he would like to confide to the charitable care of Aurelius which he cannot commit to writing (*quae nollem per litteras ad te uenire*). "There are many things in my life and social intercourse that I weep over" (*multa sunt, quae de nostra uita et conuersatione deflerem*), Augustine writes.⁴⁵ These are the things Augustine would like to talk about with Aurelius, heart to heart (*inter cor meum et cor tuum*), with nothing standing in the way between Augustine's mouth and Aurelius's ears (*nulla essent ministeria praeter os meum et aures tuas*). "Between your heart and mine let there be no intermediary except my mouth and your ears," Augustine says to Aurelius.⁴⁶ Augustine had come to trust Aurelius as no one else in the ecclesiastical world of Roman Africa. And so to Aurelius Augustine was prepared to unveil his soul. The confessional trope is unmistakable in this letter.

Augustine seems not to have minded receiving a substitute from Aurelius's inner circle in the person of Saturninus, most likely the bishop of Uzalis, with whom Augustine had become acquainted when he and Alypius and their entourage arrived in Carthage in late 388 (*De ciuitate Dei* 22.8). If Saturninus should wish to come to Thagaste at a time of his convenience "I shall confide in his holy and spiritual affection, and it will be almost the same as if I were dealing with your worthy self. I cannot express in words how deeply I wish that you would ask and obtain this favor from him."⁴⁷ Augustine deeply longs for the opportunity to unburden himself to either Aurelius or Saturninus. The details of what that confession would entail are hidden from view. But the urgency in Augustine's request should not be missed, even if it is somewhat muted.

VI. — CONCLUSION

The reference to Alypius's renunciation of the world, the confessional tone about Augustine's defects, the invocation of the treble vices of *Romans* 13.13-14, and the allusions to the practices of the church in Italy, all serve to point out how much of Augustine's Milanese experience is in the background of *Letter* 22. Written as it was at the time of Augustine's absence from Hippo, during his sabbatical prior to fully resuming his responsibilities as priest, *Letter* 22 provides a fascinating glimpse into aspects of Augustine's past and his understanding of the inextricable link between his conversion and the vocation he had now entered.

44. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.2.9 (CSEL 34¹, 61). FC 12, p. 57.

45. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.2.9 (CSEL 34¹, 61).

46. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.2.9 (CSEL 34¹, 61). FC 12, p. 57.

47. AUGUSTINE, *Ep.* XXII.2.9 (CSEL 34¹, 62). FC 12, p. 57.

It should be clear from all this that years before Augustine came to write the *Confessions* he had already alluded to the inextricable link between *Romans* 13.13-14 and his conversion in *Letter 22*. In his desire to unveil his soul to Aurelius concerning those defects that could not be committed to writing, we may detect the confessional trope that eventually found expression in the *Confessions*. Augustine's use of *Romans* 13.13-14 in *Letter 22* also anticipates his much fuller description of his conversion in *Confessions* 8.12.29. For him, *Romans* 13.13-14 constituted a personal manifesto about the Christian life. Its singular use in *Letter 22* should be seen, then, as a testament to the story that Augustine would eventually tell with such pathos in *Confessions* 8. Both Ferrari's claim about fabrication and Fredriksen's more nuanced concept of Pauline imitation are questionable, especially when we appreciate the retrospective elements in *Letter 22*. The idea that Augustine appropriated Paul's conversion story as the pattern for his own narrative in the *Confessions* is simply not credible. It is more fiction than fact.

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