

## Augustine's Spiritualisation of the Poor in an Era of Crisis<sup>1</sup>

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The research on which this paper is based was made possible by funding from a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research, as I show you in the first footnote of this paper. Our three-year project entitled 'Augustine's Understanding and Practice of Poverty in an Era of Crisis' (Principal Investigator is Prof. Kazuhiko Demura of Okayama University), which will issue reports on the proposed research in 2012, started with collaboration with the Centre for Early Christian Studies of Australian Catholic University in Brisbane. We have already published a book "Prayer and Spirituality" volume 5: Poverty and Riches in 2009, which was conducted by this Centre and the APECSS (Asia-Pacific Early Christian Studies Society).

### INTRODUCTION

Examples showing how Augustine refers to the theme of poverty and the poor from his youth onwards would be found not only in his early writings but in many of his later works, and the subject has recently received considerable interest, especially when we appreciate the work of Australian research group, *Preaching Poverty in Late Antiquity*,<sup>2</sup> which 'considers the plight of the poor and responses to them from the early Roman empire through to late antiquity and Byzantium.' (p. 15) In its chapter 4, entitled 'Augustine on Poverty', Prof. Pauline Allen and Dr. Edward Morgan, along with comprehensive study of Augustine's view into poverty, poor relief, and voluntary poverty, have investigated the issues within his huge amount of text thoroughly. It may be tempting to take the simple view of poverty and the poor, because of the various genres of his writings, such as sermons, letters, theological, exegetical, and theoretical tractates. However, this valuable and illuminating study has sought to set out the framework for his discourse within which both types of his caritative model, flesh-and-blood and theological ones, have been found to occur. In his sermons and letters, they have shown that 'the most important part of his caritative programme was constituted by almsgiving'. (p. 163) In addition to its efficacious and practical advantages on the part of the donees, Augustine encouraged his congregations to give alms, so that they would

<sup>1</sup> The research on which this paper is based was made possible by funding from a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) (No. 21520084: 'Augustine's Understanding and Practice of Poverty in an Era of Crisis') of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science. A first version of it was presented at the Joint Japanese-Australian Seminar on Crisis in Late Antiquity held at Australian Catholic University, Brisbane, in March 2011.

<sup>2</sup> P. Allen, B. Neil, and W. Mayer, eds. *Preaching Poverty in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Realities*, *Arbeiten zur Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte*, 28 (Leipzig 2009).

develop a sense of commitment and solidarity among them. Efforts are, thus, focused on largely rhetorical constructs of the poor in his works that contribute, not to the illusionary character of Augustine and his hearers as 'social revolutionaries' (p. 162), but to the limited advocacy for the common humanity, along with 'psychological, social, and eschatological dimensions' (p. 163). Throughout his discourse on the spiritualising of poverty, the issue of almsgiving is accompanied by his prescription for communal behaviour and solidarity.

But how precisely did Augustine think about almsgiving and what did he consider to be the characteristics of the inner disposition of the almsgiver? Augustine was concerned with giving alms as a means of stimulating the solidarity in the community. All the same, it is interesting to note that an innovative approach to almsgiving was expressed with regard to its intention: the cultivation of the donor's disposition ought to precede the relief of the actual poor. Did Augustine primarily aim to achieve psychological improvement of the donor's soul? Did he encourage his hearers to use the poor as the instrument of the giver's salvation? It is my intention in this paper to consider his view of almsgiving and of the disposition of the giver, a deliberation which might help to construct a more holistic picture of almsgiving. For the sake of clarity and argument, I shall first examine the passages focused on the self-interest of the almsgiver, and proceed to consider the issues thematically as far as possible.

#### THE PROBLEMATICS OF ALMSGIVING

My first account of the almsgiving begins by examining Augustine's references to the inner state of the almsgiver found in both Book 21 of the *City of God* and Chapter 20 of the *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Charity*. Since these texts were written around the same time (the former finished by 426/427, and the latter composed in 421/422), we find a similar concern with respect to the issue of almsgiving.

In the second main part (Books 11-22) of the *City of God*, Augustine's representation of the poor and poverty-related themes may be divided into two groups: first, he occasionally interprets the meaning of the poor appeared in some scriptural passages;<sup>3</sup> second, he focuses on the eschatological dimension of poverty.<sup>4</sup> It is remarkable, then, that in Book 21 he clarifies the point that the behaviour of mercy would be defined as a means of both realising the future benefit and improving the inner disposition of the almsgiver.<sup>5</sup> Augustine agrees with those who claim the suitable act of mercy must be done in order to atone their sins. It is increasingly difficult to gain the divine forgiveness by virtue of their alms. For how could they know the appropriate level of the practice? Augustine turns his attention to consider the disposition of the giver.

<sup>3</sup> See *De ciuitate dei* 14.9.5 (Matth. 24:12, 10:22); 17.4 (Samuel 2.1-10); 18.32 (Habakkuk); 18.35 (Zechariah).

<sup>4</sup> See *De ciuitate dei* 20.1-2.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *De ciuitate dei* 1.10.2.

And yet if they had distributed all their goods to the needy members of Christ in atonement for just one sin, this could not have been of any service to them, if they had abandoned such practices by the acquisition of the 'love which does no evil' (cf. 1 Cor. 13:4). Therefore, anyone who would perform acts of mercy in adequate proportion to his sins should begin with himself in their performance. For it is wrong not to do to oneself what one does to one's neighbour, since we have heard God saying 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'; and we have been told to 'have compassion on your own soul by pleasing God' (Lev. 19:18; cf. Matt. 22:39; Ecclus. 30:24). If anyone does not show this mercy to his own soul, that is, by pleasing God, how can he be said to perform acts of mercy in adequate proportion to his sins? (*City of God* 21.27.2, trans. Henry Bettenson (1972) 1016)<sup>6</sup>

It is not only in the *City of God* referred to above that a set of scriptural passages: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Matth. 22:38; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27) and 'Have compassion on your own soul by pleasing God' (Ecclus. 30:24) occur; indeed, these are the passages which are common in Augustine's writings, applied to his idea of the properly ordered love such as the soul's movement towards the self rather than outwards.

A person who wishes to give alms as they should be given must begin from himself and give them first to himself. Almsgiving is a work of mercy, and the saying is very true: *Have mercy on your soul and please God* (Eccl 30:24). ... The Pharisees, having neglected the justice and the love of God, used to tithe the tiniest items of their produce for the alms they gave, and so they did not begin from themselves when giving alms or show mercy first to themselves. Because of this order of love it is said: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself* (Lk 10:27). So, after rebuking those who washed themselves outside but were full of greed and wickedness within, he taught them to purify themselves within by giving alms of the kind that a man should give himself first of all; he said, *But for the rest give alms and see, everything is clean for you* (Lk 11:37-41). (*Enchiridion* 20.76, trans. Bruce Harbert, in WSA I/8 (2005) 318)<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> *De ciuitate dei* 21.27.2: 'Qui si pro uno scelere omnia sua distribuerent indigentibus membris Christi, nisi desisterent a talibus factis habendo caritatem, quae non agit perperam, aliquid eis prodesse non posset. Qui ergo dignas pro suis peccatis elemosynas facit, prius eas facere incipiat a se ipso. Indignum est enim, ut in se non faciat, qui facit in proximum, cum audiat dicentem Deum: *Diliges proximum tuum tamquam te ipsum*; itemque audiat: *Miserere animae tuae placens Deo*. Hanc elemosynam, id est, ut Deo placeat, non faciens animae suae quomodo dignas pro peccatis suis elemosynas facere dicendus est?'

<sup>7</sup> *Enchiridion de fide spe et caritate* 20.76: 'Qui enim vult ordinate dare eleemosynam a se ipso debet incipere et eam sibi primum dare. Est enim eleemosyna opus misericordiae, verissimeque dictum est: *Miserere animae tuae placens Deo*. ... Quod iudicium et caritatem Dei cum pharisaei praeterirent decimabant quidem propter eleemosynas quas faciebant etiam quaecumque minutissima fructuum suorum, et ideo non dabant eleemosynas a se incipientes secumque prius misericordiam facientes. Propter quem dilectionis ordinem dictum est: *Diliges proximum tuum tamquam te ipsum*. Cum ergo increpasset eos quod forinsecus se lavabant, intus autem rapina et

Not only does he regard almsgiving as an expression of alleviating the punishments in this life, thereby expecting his hearers to provide for the future repose, but it should be predominantly and primarily advocated for taking care of the individual giver. Augustine shows a clear preference for the moral and spiritual development, rather than the expected favour of both the receiver and the donor of alms. His interest here is revealed in the coherent expressions of temporal sequence: 'should begin with himself ... give them first to himself ... show mercy first to themselves ... should give himself first of all'. In its psychological dimension, therefore, almsgiving has to be conducted first by looking after a defective, poor status of the donor's soul.

Augustine's conviction that it is necessary to perform a work of mercy which should give alms first to the individual's own self, thereby purifying the inner aspects of the soul, is relevant to his emphasis on the necessity to attend to both the intention of the giver and the power of spiritual alms. He recapitulates precisely what he says with some examples of the donor such as the Pharisees and 'a man of great wealth' as follows:

God is not concerned about the recipient of a gift, but about its motive. (*City of God* 21.27.3, Bettenson 1016-17)<sup>8</sup>

We are reborn in order to please God, ... These are the first alms we gave ourselves. (*Enchiridion* 20.76, Harbert 318)<sup>9</sup>

Augustine's primary concern is with the intention of the giver that serves as a driving force to the spiritual giving. Although he does not decrease the value of material alms (and 'describes almsgiving as having two poles, the spiritual and the material'<sup>10</sup>), it is clear that almsgiving of this kind opens the way for a transformation of the self.

#### THE PROBLEM OF THE INNER DISPOSITION

We shall now turn to some texts in Augustine's homiletic and theological works in which the question of almsgiving and of the inner disposition of almsgiver is prominent. I shall begin with his remarks about the issue found in *Sermones ad populum* and *Enarrationes in Psalmos*.

In fact it is noteworthy that, within his discourse on almsgiving, Augustine repeatedly expresses concern about the intention of the almsgiver. At the beginning of the first exposition of Psalm 48, while directing his hearers' attention to the opening addresses repeated, he focuses on those to whom the utterance is addressed. And he

iniquitate pleni erant, admonens quadam eleemosyna quam sibi homo debet primitus dare, interiora mundari: *Verumtamen, inquit, quod superest date eleemosynam et ecce omnia munda sunt vobis.*'

<sup>8</sup> *De ciuitate dei* 21.27.3: 'Deus, non cui detur, sed quo animo detur, attendit.'

<sup>9</sup> *Enchiridion de fide spe et caritate* 20.76: 'Propter hoc renascimur, ... Haec est prima eleemosyna quam nobis dedimus, ....'

<sup>10</sup> Allen and Morgan 141.

juxtaposes the contrast between the 'earthlings' (sinners) and the 'sons of men' (the faithful and just) with the difference of the 'hearts' between the rich and the poor:

The word *rich* applies to the earthlings, and *poor* to the sons of men. Take the rich to be the proud, the poor to be the humble. Someone may have plenty of money and resources, and yet not be haughty about it, and then he or she is poor. Another may have nothing, yet be covetous and puffed up, and then God classes him or her with the rich and reprobate. God questions both rich and poor in their hearts, not in their treasure-chests or their houses. (*En. in Ps. 48, Serm. 1.3*, trans. M. Boulding, in WSA III/16, 352-353)<sup>11</sup>

This view of the opposition between humility and pride lies at the heart of Augustine's view of the inner intention. It is a desirable attitude in relation to God. The poor are seen not as a worthy recipient of material alms but as an exemplar of the spiritually poor who 'remain immovably attached to him who created the whole'. (*En. in Ps. 48, Serm. 1.3*) It is not 'their treasure-chests or their houses' but the nature of people's disposition in which God examines both the poor and the rich.<sup>12</sup>

*A sinner borrows on interest, but will not repay.* He or she receives, but will not give back. Give back what? Gratitude. What does God want of you, what does God demand of you, except what it profits you to give? ... Contemplate poverty on the other hand, plenty on the other. The first receives, but will not pay his debt; the second is merciful and lends, and yet is wealthy. What if the merciful person is poor? He or she is rich nonetheless. Direct those God-fearing eyes of yours at his riches. (*En. in Ps. 36, Serm. 2.13*, trans. M. Boulding, in WSA III/16, 113)<sup>13</sup>

In the second exposition of Psalm 36, in which he shows both the will of God and the mixture of different types of people in this life, the just and the unjust, Augustine expects his congregations to give alms as much as they can and yet not to make a total renunciation of personal property. When he describes what it is that he values in the act of almsgiving, the emphasis not on their amount of such as money, food, clothing, and other supplies but on a compassionate sharing of their possessions in proportion to their capacity is evident. Thus, good intentions of the almsgiver should be highly honoured.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *En. in Ps. 48, Serm. 1.3*: 'Quod ait *dives*, ad terrigenas pertinet; quod ait, *pauper*, ad filios hominum. Divites intellege superbos, pauperes humiles. Habeat multas facultates pecuniarum; si in eis non extollitur, pauper est: non habeat aliquid, et cupiat et infletur; inter divites et reprobos eum deputat Deus. Et divites et pauperes in corde interrogat Deus, non in arca et domo.'

<sup>12</sup> See also *Serm. 105A.1*; *En. in Ps. 36, Serm. 1.4*.

<sup>13</sup> *En. in Ps. 36, Serm. 2.13*: '*Feneratur peccator, et non solvet.* Accipit, et non reddet. Quid non reddet? Gratiarum actionem. Quid enim a te vult Deus, aut quid exigit Deus, nisi quod tibi prosit? ... Videte egestatem, videte divitias. Ille accipit, et non solvet: iste miseretur, et commodat; abundat illi. Quid si pauper est? Etiam sic dives est. Tu tantum ad divitias eius pios oculos intende.'

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. *En. in Ps. 49.13*; *En. in Ps. 67.41*; *Serm. 39.6*; *Serm. 42.2*; *Serm. 86.14.17*; *Serm. 107A.8*.

*Cleanse the things within*, he advised them, *and then things without will be clean too* (Mt 2:26). In another place the Lord says, *Give alms, and everything will be clean for you* (Lk 11:41). But where does almsgiving spring from? From the heart. So true is this that, if you open your hand but have no compassion in your heart, you have done nothing, whereas, if you have nothing in your hand to give but have merciful intentions in your heart, God accepts your alms. (*En. in Ps.* 125.5, trans. M. Boulding, in WSA III/20 (2004) 73)<sup>15</sup>

Such is the way Augustine describes the intention of the almsgiver as the psychological, proper rationale of almsgiving, and appreciates the crucial importance of compassion in the act of almsgiving. If there exists no 'merciful intentions in your heart', then the alms diminish its value.

But apart from these homiletic texts, it is noteworthy that, in one of his early works, Augustine explicitly identifies the merciful intentions as a crucial source of almsgiving and shows a method of improving the inner disposition. In the work *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum* (written in the years 387-389), in which, while portraying the poor and needy only in the most general terms (e.g. *pauper*, *mendicans*, *egentes*, *indigens*, or *inops*), Augustine's primary concern was to characterise the donor's attitude as well as practice of almsgiving. It should be classified under mercy (*misericordia*).

Hence, those who dutifully and humbly provide all these means by which such evils and difficulties are warded off are called merciful [*misericors*], ... For who can fail to know that mercy [*misericordia*] received its name because it makes miserable the heart of a person who suffers along with another's woes? (*De moribus* 1.27.53, trans. R. Teske, in WSA I/19 (2006) 55)<sup>16</sup>

Augustine states that the wise is totally free from an emotional response to the sight of misfortune, 'when he helps someone in need, when he offers food to someone hungry and drink to someone thirsty'. (*De mor.* 1.27.53) The most important feature of almsgiving is, thus not the deep affection for the poor, but the tranquillity of mind of the donor, in which the person rightly judges the intention and integrates it with proper behaviour. Confronted with the most pressing necessity to the donor of almsgiving, Augustine strongly emphasises the need of pedagogical discipline for the health (*sanitas*) of soul.

when we exhort and teach people to give to the needy [*indigens*] those things that we said should be provided for the body. For, when we do these things, we assist the body with help, and when

<sup>15</sup> *En. in Ps* 125.5: 'Mundate, inquit, quae intus sunt, et quae foris sunt munda erunt. Ipse Dominus dicit alio loco: Verum date eleemosynas, et ecce omnia munda sunt vobis. Unde autem procedit eleemosyna? De corde. Si enim manum porrigas, nec in corde miserearis, nihil fecisti; si autem in corde miserearis, etiamsi non habeas quod porrigas manu, acceptat Deus eleemosynam tuam'. See also *En. in Ps.* 125.11.

<sup>16</sup> *De moribus* 1.27.53: 'Quare illa omnia, quibus huiusmodi malis incommodisve resistitur, qui officiose atque humiliter praebent, misericordes vocantur, ... nam quis ignoret ex eo appellatam esse misericordiam, quod miserum cor faciat condolentis alieno malo?'

we teach people to do them, we assist the mind with instruction [*disciplina*]. (*De moribus* 1.28.55, Teske 56)<sup>17</sup>

The passage again suggests that the beneficiary is understood as being needy in general arising from material deprivation. My interest is, however, in the phrase “when we do... we assist” that is repeated. The almsgiving is clearly promoted in the double context of the recipient and the donor. The motivation for this is not merely an attempt to improve physical conditions for the donee; it apparently helps the giver to impose ‘instruction’ upon their mind. Thus, to be so indefinite and abstract would be Augustine’s design that almsgiving sets a frame of instruction on the part of the donor. The almsgiver’s respected virtue can be secured only by responding to the exhortation to exercise their state of mind in the practice of almsgiving.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Within the limitations of this investigation, it can be seen how, in Augustine’s discourse on almsgiving, the giver’s merciful intention and psychological transformation of the individual self continued to be an appropriate focus for the evaluation and to serve as the basis for an act of charitable giving. According to Allen and Morgan’s paper, as well as a dispositional element to his view of almsgiving, Augustine was seen as a staunch advocate for almsgiving in order to develop a sense of solidarity in the community. Also, he made an attempt to confirm his congregations in the view that, while the poor will not be necessarily exalted to heaven in proportion to the extent of their possessions, some humble rich persons will be. Attention should shift to the nature of inner disposition. Indeed, as we have shown in this paper, together with other set of social and eschatological dimensions that would help to appreciate the strategic, even if sporadic, approach to this matter, the very fact that he regarded almsgiving in terms of its inner intention indicates that Augustine used almsgiving as a means of securing the support for the improvement of the giver’s soul.

Although Augustine’s concern with almsgiving was subsidiary to his reflections on theological and spiritual problems both more extended and more elaborately constructed in his corpus, there did nevertheless maintain a significant relationship with the theme of the spiritual and gradual ascent to God. This leads to some understanding of how the spiritual alms for the poor status of almsgiver would be interwoven with one of seven steps of the ascent to true wisdom. Augustine had often concentrated on this issue in his early works. A passage such as the following is crucial:

When he beholds this light (as far as he is able to), shining as it does even into remote places, and realizes that because of the weakness of his vision he cannot bear its brilliance, he is at the fifth stage—that is, in the resolve of compassion [*consilium*

<sup>17</sup> *De moribus* 1.28.55: ‘cum hortamur et monemus, ut haec ipsa indigentibus exhibeantur quae corpori exhibenda esse diximus. Cum enim haec facimus, ope corpori, cum autem docemus ut fiant, disciplina animo subvenimus.’

*misericaediae*] —and purifies his mind, which is somehow turbulent and feuding with itself because of the impurities accumulated by its desire of what is inferior. Here he strenuously occupies himself with the love of his neighbour and becomes perfect in it. (*De Doctrina Christiana* 2.7.11, trans. R. P. H. Green (1995) 65)<sup>18</sup>

We find a clear preference for the spiritual improvement of the almsgiver, as has been already seen in my first account of the passages from *City of God* and *Enchiridion*. His audience was encouraged to show mercy first to their own soul, and to fulfil the divine commandment to love your neighbour as yourself only for the sake of their own salvation. This could not deflect criticism from some scholars. For example, in the words of John Burnaby, 'we are making not only the love of neighbour but the love of God a 'means' to our own advantage: we are attempting to 'use' not our neighbour only, but God Himself'.<sup>19</sup> Despite of the seemingly self-seeking approach to charitable giving, however, in the context of the maturing of the spiritual life, we read that Augustine's concern is primarily with the gradual, mutually cooperated ascent to the One, accompanied by the 'resolve of compassion'. Indeed, it is clear, through the seven stages of ascent to wisdom, he continuously encourages his reader to engage in strenuous exercise of both loving their neighbour and purifying the inner state of their soul: those who read the scriptures exert themselves and find the divine commandment to love God and the neighbour; after extricating themselves from all temporal things, they proceed to those final grades (fifth and sixth steps) as phases of the purification of soul. The diligent exercise of the works of mercy (*misericaedia*), as required for those who give alms, is incorporated into a grade that introduces its final stage, and not only a duty but an essential phase of the spiritual life in which his congregations are mutually led to the delights of contemplation in God.

[Fifth step] Here he strenuously occupies himself with the love of his neighbour and becomes perfect in it ... [Sixth step] he does not give a higher priority than the truth, or indeed an equal one, even to his neighbour; nor does he give such precedence to himself, since he does not give it to the one whom he loves as himself. (*De Doctrina Christiana* 2.7.11, Green 65-66)<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *De doctrina christiana* 2.7.11: 'Quam ubi aspexerit, quantum potest, in longinqua radiantem sui que aspectus infirmitate sustinere se illam lucem non posse persenserit, in quinto gradu, hoc est in consilio misericordiae, purgat animam tumultuantem quodam modo atque obstrepentem sibi de appetitu inferiorum conceptis sordibus. Hic vero se in dilectione proximi gnaviter exercet, in eaque perficitur.'

<sup>19</sup> J. Burnaby, *Amor Dei. A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine*, The Hulsean Lectures for 1938 (London 1960) 134.

<sup>20</sup> *De doctrina christiana* 2.7.11: 'Hic vero se in dilectione proximi gnaviter exercet, in eaque perficitur. ... veritati ne ipsum quidem praeferat aut conferat proximum; ergo nec seipsum, quia nec illum quem diligit sicut seipsum.'