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Christian and Pagan Identities and Their Relationship with the Spiritual Training in the Letters of Augustine

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I INTRODUCTION

In shaping the discussion on the changes of late Roman world, some scholars have claimed that the borders between religious groups were flexible, in that, for instance, the identity of Christians was not accompanied by explicit indications of its belief, observance, and practice. After an initial approach to the issue of Christian identity,¹ some studies have indicated that the distinction between Christians and pagans can serve as a context-oriented and fluid mechanism in their community.² It is interesting to note that, while the North African evidence allows us to consider the question of what it meant to be a Christian, there was a holistic and comprehensive framework for understanding the human behaviour and thought: the ‘spiritual exercises’ in the ancient philosophical tradition. The deployment of spiritual training has received frequent attention in Augustinian scholarship, particularly in Pierre Hadot’s work, where he illustrates a complex set of mode of the discipline and defines it as a ‘metamorphosis of our personality’.³ Although some scholars have primarily considered it to be the purely intellectual training of the intelligence or mind, Hadot emphasises the need to investigate its wider diversity and the purgation of the soul within the context of involving all facets of human thought and behaviour. A modification of the spiritual training in question appeared in late antiquity. In the North African Church, even sporadically, Tertullian, Cyprian, and Lactantius referred to the significance and limits of the spiritual discipline, and, from the mid-fourth century in more detail than before, Christian writers began to look into the matter. A crucial stage of the development seems to be prepared by Augustine. Provided that some surveys have considered the discipline as being linked with the context of Augustine’s concern for Christian identity in the faith community, the correlation still remains in question.⁴ In this paper, therefore, I shall first examine how he referred to the Christian code of behaviour in

¹ R. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1990).

² See M. Kahlos, *Debate and Dialogue: Christian and Pagan Cultures, c. 360–430* (Aldershot, 2007); É. Rebillard, *Christians and Their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE* (Ithaca, 2012); É. Rebillard and J. Rüpke (eds.), *Group Identity and Religious Individuality in Late Antiquity* (Washington, D.C., 2015).

³ P. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. M. Chase (Oxford, 1995) 82 and 127. See also M. Chase, S. R. L. Clark, and M. McGhee (eds.), *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Ancient and Moderns. Essays in Honor of Pierre Hadot* (Chichester, West Sussex, 2013).

⁴ See D. E. Doyle, *The Bishop as Disciplinarian in the Letters of St. Augustine* (New York, 2002); L. Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge, 2010); P. Kolbet, *Augustine and the Cure of Souls: Revising a Classical Ideal* (Notre Dame, Ind., 2010); B. Stock, *Augustine’s Inner Dialogue: The Philosophical Soliloquy in Late Antiquity* (New

his letters.⁵ Focussing my attention on epistolary exchanges with Dioscorus and Volusianus, I will show how Augustine tried to impose his idea of the Christian norms of behaviour on his correspondents. Then I will ask what Augustine understood by the spiritual training. For the sake of clarity, I have divided the letters along thematic lines into three groups and in each group I will consider them chronologically as far as possible.⁶ Finally, I shall consider the principal feature of spiritual training, thereby coming to some understanding of the horizons on which he made use of the dimension in speaking about Christian identity.

2 CHRISTIANS AND THE PLURALITY OF THEIR IDENTITIES

2.1 Letter Exchange with Dioscorus

The first group of letters to be considered is *Letters* 117 and 118, the correspondence between Augustine and Dioscorus, the latter of whose prosopographical information is mostly provided by these letters.⁷ It is more than likely, in the autumn of 410, that they opened up communication by letter. Indeed, before departing Carthage where he was studying, a young native of Greece called Dioscorus wrote asking Augustine questions about the philosophical works of Cicero, in particular his *De natura deorum* and about some of his rhetorical tractates. Although the list itself is now lost, both the first letter written by Dioscorus (*Ep.* 117) and the long answer from Augustine (*Ep.* 118) are available to us. According to the second letter in particular, it becomes clear that Augustine knows Dioscorus well enough to make many references to his life and activities: a young man, still unmarried, and first studied at Rome, most likely he was the brother of Zenobius, a friend of Augustine and to whom he dedicated one of the Cassiciacum dialogues (*De ordine*). Then, what kind of other things about him would be known to us?

It is interesting to note that Possidius, Augustine's friend and his biographer, classified this letter exchange into the group designated 'Against Pagans' in his *Indiculum* of Augustine's works, appended to the *Life of Augustine*.⁸ Because of the main part of *Letter* 118 and Dioscorus's deep concern for pagan philosophy, some scholars have been inclined to consider him as a pagan. The communication between Augustine and such a pagan was developed on the basis of their rational behaviour, in particular of Augustine's politeness and courtesy. His response would be interpreted as an affirmation of Dioscorus's paganism and a respect for the Greco-Roman classical culture. This seems to be the same as the other pagan correspondents, for instance, Longinianus (*Ep.* 233-235), Volusianus (*Ep.* 132), and Maximus (*Ep.* 17). How-

York, 2010); J. Ebbeler, *Disciplining Christians: Correction and Community in Augustine's Letters* (Oxford, 2012); X. Pavie, *Exercices spirituels: leçons de la philosophie antique* (Paris, 2012).

⁵ For a selected bibliography on Augustine's letters see R. B. Eno, 'Epistulae', in: A. Fitzgerald et al. (eds.), *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids Mich., 1999) 298-310; J. Divjak, 'Epistulae', in: C. Mayer et al. (eds.), *Augustinus-Lexikon*, vol. 2 (Basel, 1996-2002) 1046-1057.

⁶ With regard to the chronology of his letters, see O. Perler and J.-L. Maier, *Les voyages de saint Augustin* (Paris, 1969); R. B. Eno, 'Epistulae', 298-310; J. Divjak, 'Epistulae', 1027-1036; R. Teske, trans. *The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century*, II/1-4: Letters (Hyde Park NY, 2001-2005).

⁷ On Dioscorus, see A. Mandouze, *Prosopographie chrétienne du bas-empire*, vol. 1. *Prosopographie de l'Afrique chrétienne (303-533)* (Paris, 1982) 279-280: Dioscorus 2; F. Morgenstern, *Die Briefpartner des Augustinus von Hippo: prosopographische, sozial- und ideologiegeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Bochum, 1993) 79-80.

⁸ A. Wilmart, 'Operum S. Augustini elenchus a Possidio eiusdem discipulo Calamensi episcopo digestus', in: *Miscellanea Agostiniana*, 2 (Rome, 1931) 149-233 at 163.

ever, with regard to the religious affiliation of Dioscorus, Augustine explicitly mentions that Dioscorus shows a decided preference for ‘Christian teaching’, rather than for all others: ‘you are confident that it [sc. Christian teaching] alone contains the hope of eternal salvation’.⁹ In fact, he is quite anxious for Dioscorus to seek another way of finding the truth: his warning is given against the deviation from the way that ‘he [sc. Christ] constructed who, as God, saw the weakness of our steps.’¹⁰ Although it is not certain whether they met in Carthage or somewhere around there, the various activities of Dioscorus were familiar to Augustine, which included the fact that he was not a pagan.

This letter provides the detailed compendium of his views on contemporary pagan philosophy. It comprises the teachings of the Stoics, Academics, Epicureans, and Platonist. Augustine dedicates over thirty long paragraphs to answer the questions posed by the youth, despite his highly critical of ‘those old, worn-out errors of many people [sc. philosophers]’.¹¹ Perhaps it might be suggested that Augustine feels real sympathy for a young ambitious dilettante because of the similarity of the current status to that of his own past. He does not show any reluctance to talk about his old self, who once instructed boys in rhetoric. However, Augustine’s criticism is explicit: due to the standpoint of Dioscorus, in which he is willing to shift Augustine back to his past as a professor of rhetoric, not attending to his present position as a bishop.

it is not evident to me that there is nothing improper involved in this matter [sc. Dioscorus’s questions]. For my mind fails to find a proper appearance of things when I think that a bishop, torn this way and that by noisy concerns of the Church, holds himself back from all these, as if suddenly become deaf, and explains minor questions about Ciceronian dialogues to a single student.¹² the basilica of the Christians at Hippo occurred to you as the place to deposit your concerns, because there now sits in it a bishop who once sold such ideas to children.¹³

In chiding his literary correspondent for the eagerness to his intellectual pursuits once shared by himself, he would rather criticise Dioscorus for placing a higher priority on the previous identity of Augustine. Thus, although, in the lengthy reply to Dioscorus, Augustine’s disapproval of the intellectual snobbery is often expressed, the central concern of this letter appears to be the hierarchical and irreversible order of the identities and commitments: Dioscorus is fully expected to reconsider its arrangement based on his religious affiliation.

2.2 Letter Exchange with Volusianus

The second group of letters to be examined is *Letters* 132, 135, and 137, the correspondences between Augustine and Volusianus, the latter of whose life and activities, and whose family

⁹ Aug. *Ep.* 118.2.11: ‘christianam doctrinam . . . in ea sola esse praesumere spem salutis aeternae’; WSA II/2, 110.

¹⁰ Aug. *Ep.* 118.3.22: ‘illo qui gressuum nostrorum tamquam Deus vidit infirmitatem.’; WSA II/2, 116.

¹¹ Aug. *Ep.* 118.1.7: ‘multorum annos et decrepitas falsitates’; WSA II/2, 108.

¹² Aug. *Ep.* 118.1.2: ‘in hac re nihil esse dedecoris, non mihi videtur. Non enim decora facies rerum attingit sensum meum, cum cogito episcopum ecclesiasticis curis circumstrepentibus districtum atque distentum, repente quasi obsurdentem cohibere se ab his omnibus, et dialogorum Tullianorum quaestiunculas uni scholastico exponere.’; WSA II/2, 105.

¹³ Aug. *Ep.* 118.2.9: ‘ubi has curas tuas deponeres, christianorum tibi basilica Hipponensis occurrit, quia in ea nunc sedet episcopus qui aliquando ista pueris vendidit.’; WSA II/2, 110.

members are also known to us by several documents (including *Vita Melaniae Iunioris*, in which the story of his baptism on his deathbed is told).¹⁴ At the time when he was living in Carthage (411-412), Volusianus received a letter from Augustine (*Ep.* 132) in 411 or 412. Then, the young aristocrat replied with a series of questions (*Ep.* 135), because of Augustine's prompt to write back to him, and Marcellinus, an imperial military officer, sent to Augustine further questions posed by Volusianus (*Ep.* 136). Soon after receiving these letters, Augustine sent a reply to Volusianus (*Ep.* 137) and responded to the questions mentioned in the previous these letters.

Augustine begins with communication from encouraging Volusianus to read the scriptures, in particular 'the letters of the apostles'.¹⁵ He also prompts Volusianus to write back with many questions as arising from this reading. It is interesting to note that Augustine would choose to think about such subject through the letter writing rather than by conversing together. It may be partly because there is a difficulty in setting up a meeting schedule. Yet another reason is perhaps more important. He is willing to distance themselves away from 'the intruding presence of those who are not suited for such an undertaking and find more delight in contents of the tongue than in the enlightenment of knowledge.'¹⁶ In comparison with the genuineness of the scriptures, he once again criticises 'the false beauty of rhetoric' for enticing those who are longing for the truth 'by obscure language'.¹⁷ Augustine proposes, therefore, to exclude his interest in rhetoric and audience of the dialogue, both of which are assumed to be an obstacle to focus on the spiritual matter.

Volusianus replies to the invitation from Augustine and wrote back with some questions. It is clearly admitted that, although he seems to fulfil his promise to address various questions, his main concern is to report the recent gatherings of a circle of friends in Carthage and to share the achievement in their discussions. Volusianus informs Augustine about the 'various talents and interests' of the discussants.¹⁸ These learned friends are pagans and Roman aristocrats, with whom he has some particular interest in common. They all are comfortable talking with one another about the pleasure of rhetorical composition, the eloquence of poetry, and the great accomplishment of philosophers. Not only does he repeatedly remind Augustine of his former career as a professor of rhetoric and the education he has received: 'I speak to someone who knows about that. For you also taught this a little before. ... with which [sc. philosophy] you are familiar and which you yourself are accustomed to cultivate. ...',¹⁹ but further at the end of the letter, with apparently a polite and sympathetic attitude towards his position, Volusianus urges Augustine to determine their relationship from the viewpoint of a group of his friends.

It is a matter of interest for your reputation that I come to know the answers to my questions, because

¹⁴ On Volusianus, see *Prosopographie chrétienne du bas-empire, 2. Prosopographie de l'Italie chrétienne (313-604)* (Rome, 2000) 2340-2341: Volusianus 1; F. Morgenstern, *Die Briefpartner des Augustinus von Hippo*, 125. See also M. Moreau, *Le dossier Marcellinus dans la correspondance de saint Augustin* (Paris, 1973).

¹⁵ Aug. *Ep.* 132: 'Apostolorum linguas'; WSA II/2, 202.

¹⁶ Aug. *Ep.* 132: 'eorum irruentem praesentiam, qui plerumque non sunt apti tali negotio, magisque linguae certaminibus, quam scientiae luminibus delectantur'; WSA II/2, 202.

¹⁷ Aug. *Ep.* 132: 'fucatis eloquiis ... linguae tectorio'; WSA II/2, 202.

¹⁸ Aug. *Ep.* 135.1: 'ingeniis studisque sententiae'; WSA II/2, 208.

¹⁹ Aug. *Ep.* 135.1: 'apud agnoscentem loquor; nam etiam ista paulo ante docuisti. ... ad familiarem tuam ... quam ipse ... fovere consueveras.'; WSA II/2, 208.

ignorance may somehow or other be tolerated in other priests without harm to the worship of God, but when it comes to Augustine, the bishop, whatever he may happen not to know is a failing in what is right.²⁰

According to his report on the cordial meeting, one of the participants interrupted their conversation and raised a series of unsuitable questions about Christianity.

‘And who is perfectly imbued with the wisdom of Christianity, who can resolve certain ambiguous points on which I am stuck and can strengthen my hesitant assent with true or probable grounds for belief?’ ... ‘I wonder whether the Lord and ruler of the world filled the body of an inviolate woman, whether she endured those long annoyances over ten months, and whether, though a virgin, she nonetheless had the child in the ordinary manner of giving birth and after this her virginity remained intact.’²¹

It is noticeable that Volusianus tells Augustine about the questions raised by a friend of the circle, not about those of his own. Neither does he attempt to pose some questions about the scriptural reading, nor to communicate with Augustine about his own uncertainty as to the incarnation and the miracles Christ performed. Despite of the fact that Marcellinus writes to Augustine to make known the questions about these issues, which have ‘been examined again and again’ by Volusianus and his fellows in Carthage,²² Volusianus intends to deflect the attention of the bishop away from the teachings of Christianity. Indeed, it is difficult to determine whether Volusianus was a pagan when he received the letter from Augustine. But, it is certain that, contrary to Augustine’s concern for the spiritual health of the young aristocrat, Volusianus invites him to the circle of erudite friends. Volusianus explicitly prefers his own intellectual interest shared with others to the religious affiliation, the latter of which was not high on the list of priorities.

These letters I have examined so far give a clear picture of Augustine’s experience with less committed Christians whose religious identity resulted in no conflict with the social and intellectual engagement: they ‘activate different allegiances, depending on the different contexts of interaction’.²³ They would communicate with Augustine from the use of their knowledge about Augustine’s former career as a professor of rhetoric. Although Augustine have repeatedly focused on the concern of how to integrate a way of Christian living, it seems to be of little interest to both Dioscorus and Volusianus to be conscious of the incongruity between these codes of behaviour and thought. As a bishop who was confronted with an intellectual traditionalist, he would persuade his correspondent to pay attention to the exclusive privilege granted to the Christian way of life. But how did he suggest a way of disciplining them to conform to it?

²⁰ Aug. *Ep.* 135.2: ‘Interest famae tuae, ut quaesita noverimus. Vt cumque absque detrimento cultus divini in aliis sacerdotibus toleratur incitiae; at cum ad antistitem Augustinum venit, legi deest quidquid contigerit ignorari.’; WSA II/2, 209.

²¹ Aug. *Ep.* 135.2: ‘Et quis, inquit, est sapientia ad perfectum Christianitatis imbutus, qui ambigua in quibus haereo possit aperire, dubiosque assensus meos vera vel verisimili credulitate firmare? ... Miror utrum mundi Dominus et rector intemeratae feminae corpus impleverit, pertulerit decem mensium longa illa fastidia mater, et tamen virgo enixa sit solemnitate pariendi, et post haec virginitas intacta permanserit.’; WSA II/2, 209.

²² Aug. *Ep.* 136.1: ‘usquequaque detrita est’; WSA II/2, 210.

²³ É. Rebillard, ‘Religious Sociology: Being Christian in the Time of Augustine’, in: M. Vessey (ed.), *A Companion to Augustine* (West Sussex, 2012) 40-53 at 52.

3 SPIRITUAL TRAINING IN THE LETTERS OF AUGUSTINE

3.1 the intellectual and therapeutic aspect of spiritual training

The first letter to be considered is *Letter 26*, dating from the period 394/395, addressed to Licentius,²⁴ the son of Augustine's wealthy patron, Romanianus. Licentius had sent Augustine a lengthy poem (*Carmen*) attached to this letter, which, blended the Roman mythology together with the Christian scriptures, would exhibit a compendium of the mathematical disciplines and an upwards journey and an ascent towards light.²⁵ While pointing to reasons for anxiety that he felt about his former student's circumstances, his reply indicates another way of finding the path to God, distinguished from that of an apparently Varronian (Varro of Reate) path in Licentius' poem. Augustine speaks of the temporal stage of progress towards eternal embrace, in which wisdom has first prepared for us and 'tamed by certain laborious exercises'.²⁶ When he sets out what it is that he is stimulated by the poem, the allusion to the problematic for Licentius' way of life would be seen as the urge to concentrate his attention on the mind, thereby compelling him to cling to Christ: 'Christ is the truth.'²⁷ This emphasis on the thoroughgoing internal reflection which also evokes their—Licentius, Augustine, and their friends—experience at a villa of Cassiciacum is taken very seriously by Augustine. It is one of the essential elements of his view which has followed ancient tradition of the spiritual exercises: they were the acute consciousness of the purification and the rectification of the mind.

Next we consider the group of *Letters 37, 56, 102, 162, 193, 202A, and 2**, composed from 397 to 428, thus covering almost all of his episcopal period. The first of these letters, *Letter 37*, dating in approximately 397, is addressed to his first mentor and friend, Simplician, who succeeded Ambrose as bishop of Milan in 397, and was probably accompanied by Augustine's work, *De diuersis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum libri duo*.²⁸ In this short letter, not only does he express the pleasure that his writings have been of particular interest to his friend but pointed to his attempt to respond a small set of queries from him. Despite the difficulties of resolving these problems he has faced, Augustine clearly acknowledges that Simplician would expect him to being exercised in such a way as to consider the problems, which come to be his first literary work as a bishop of Hippo, conforming to the various scriptural passages under investigation.

Letter 56, written perhaps around 400 and addressed to Celer,²⁹ the wealthy landowner of senatorial rank in Hippo Regius, provides a typical example of Augustine's encouragement 'to be trained in the studies leading to salvation in the knowledge of things human and divine.'³⁰ With regard to his idea about spiritual progress of the mind, it is interesting to note that

²⁴ On Licentius, see A. Mandouze, *Prosopographie chrétienne du bas-empire*, 1, 640-642; F. Morgenstern, *Die Briefpartner des Augustinus von Hippo*, 11-12, 42.

²⁵ See D. Shanzer, 'Licentius's Verse Epistle to Augustine', *Revue des études augustiniennes*, 37 (1991) 110-43.

²⁶ Aug. *Ep.* 26.1.2: 'exercitatoriis quibusdam laboribus edomuerit'; WSA II/1, 78.

²⁷ Aug. *Ep.* 26.1.6: 'Christus est veritas'; WSA II/1, 81.

²⁸ See F. Morgenstern, *Die Briefpartner des Augustinus von Hippo*, 43.

²⁹ On Celer, see Mandouze, *Prosopographie chrétienne du bas-empire*, 1, 202-203; F. Morgenstern, *Die Briefpartner des Augustinus von Hippo*, 74; S. Lancel, *Saint Augustine*, trans. A. Nevill (London, 2002) 276.

³⁰ Aug. *Ep.* 56.1: 'salubribusque studiis in rerum divinarum atque humanarum cognitione oblectari atque exerceri velim'; WSA II/1, 237.

Augustine here refers to a more difficult task as ‘to break the chain of sinfulness, which has become habitual and like a friend’,³¹ that is, the view of spiritual exercises bringing together its intellectual aspect with therapeutic one, depending on the comparison between temporal and eternal life promised us ‘through Christ and in Christ.’³²

Letter 102, dating from between 406 and 412, is addressed to Augustine’s fellow-priest, Deogratias of Carthage,³³ so long that in *Retractationes* 2.31 he described it as a book entitled *Quaestiones expositae contra paganos*. After considering six questions which might partially derive from those of Porphyry,³⁴ at the end of this letter, Augustine stresses the importance of those questions concerning divine scriptures from the viewpoint of the exercises of mind.

But clearly, once we already hold onto the faith, we should investigate those questions with great eagerness in order to bring the minds of the faithful to experience pious delight, and we should share without any arrogance or pride whatever light we find in them.³⁵

Letter 162, a part of the exchange between Augustine and his friend Evodius,³⁶ the bishop of Uzalis, was written in 414/415. At the beginning of this letter, as a preliminary to replying to the questions Evodius asked him in the previous letters,³⁷ Augustine openly admits the fact that even those ‘who are endowed with a mind that is less sharp and less well trained’³⁸ devoted themselves to reading and understanding what he writes about complicated problems which would be referred to later in this letter, such as the correlation between body and soul, Christ’s conception and birth, and so on. He would reflect on them afterward cautiously, thus admonishing Evodius for our having much care in writing them who want to consider these questions minutely.

Letter 193, in approximately 418 addressed to Marius Mercator,³⁹ who is Catholic layman and the author of two treatises against Pelagianism (now not extant), also contains the pedagogical aspect of these exercises and its correlation with the audience for the writings of Augustine and other people.

For we ought not to be teachers who cannot be taught, and it is certainly better that a little fellow be corrected than a rigid one be broken, for what we have written exercises and trains our weakness or that of others, even though our writings are not established with anything like the authority of the canon of scripture.⁴⁰

³¹ Aug. *Ep.* 56.2: ‘Sed ad sectandam insolitam rectitudinem, usitatae et quasi familiaris perversitatis vinculum abrumpere’; WSA II/1, 237.

³² Aug. *Ep.* 56.2: ‘per Christum atque in Christo’; WSA II/1, 237.

³³ See Mandouze, *Prosopographie chrétienne du bas-empire*, I, 271-273; F. Morgenstern, *Die Briefpartner des Augustinus von Hippo*, 57.

³⁴ See Aug. *Ep.* 102.8, 28, 30.

³⁵ Aug. *Ep.* 102.38: ‘Sed plane retenta iam fide, ad exercendam piam delectationem mentium fidelium studiosissime requirendae, et quod in eis eluxerit, sine typho arrogantiae communicandum: quod autem latuerit, sine salutis dispendio tolerandum.’; WSA II/2, 29.

³⁶ See Mandouze, *Prosopographie chrétienne du bas-empire*, I, 366-373; F. Morgenstern, *Die Briefpartner des Augustinus von Hippo*, 26.

³⁷ See Aug. *Ep.* 159, 160, and 161.

³⁸ Aug. *Ep.* 162.1: ‘qui minus acuto minusque exercitato ingenio praediti’; WSA II/3, 56.

³⁹ See Lancel, *Saint Augustine*, 347, 348, 355; F. Morgenstern, *Die Briefpartner des Augustinus von Hippo*, 90.

⁴⁰ Aug. *Ep.* 193.4.10: ‘Neque enim debemus indociles esse doctores: et certe melius homo corrigitur parvus, quam frangitur durus; cum iis quae scripsimus, ita nostra vel aliorum exercentur et erudiatur infirmitas, ut tamen in eis nulla velut canonica constituatur auctoritas.’; WSA II/3, 285.

The next reference to these exercises in *Letter* 202A, dating at the beginning of 420, written to Optatus of Milevis,⁴¹ is made in the similar context of pedagogical care for those who provide rashly and thoughtlessly an answer to a problem they do not know. Although he himself still has not found out how the soul derived original sin from Adam, Augustine clearly offers the proper place to stop their investigation, in which ‘they either find what they want or exercise the keenness of their mind by investigation’.⁴² With regard to such a crucial problem, therefore, those seems to be invited exclusively to the exercise of their mind by the enquiry.

Letter 2*, one of the so-called Divjak Letters (which Johannes Divjak discovered in 1981), was written probably in 428, that is the last in time of the Divjak Letters, addressed to Firmus,⁴³ a cultivated nobleman of Carthage, who had previously written to Augustine, sending a sample of his young son’s declamation. After exhorting Firmus to receive baptism in the body of this letter (§ 3-11), Augustine finally points to the question of Firmus’ unnamed young man.⁴⁴ The natural talent, fine liberal education, and skilled in rhetoric of the unnamed young man is highly commendable. It seems noticeable that, a very kind remark made to him, Augustine does hope the young man may devote himself not only to eloquence (which Cicero regards as useless without wisdom),⁴⁵ but to the nourishment for a more wholesome character. Although he may be reminded of the benefit of the rhetorical exercises in his youth, he cannot leave behind the path to which the way of life should be led. Therefore, he provides young man with same advice on the rectification of the mind as what he did to his fellow, Licentius (*Letter* 26).

3.2 The Religious and Eschatological Aspect of Spiritual Training

Next group of letters which were seemingly composed between 408 and 415 and pertains to Augustine’s religious dimension of these exercises, contains *Letters* 92, 130, 131, 137, and 157. *Letter* 92, dating in 408/409, was written to Italica,⁴⁶ a wealthy noblewoman and recently lost her husband, who has asked him if God could be seen with bodily eyes. With regard to the problem which he had turned again and again to try to resolve,⁴⁷ in the case of this letter, he plainly touches on the absurdity of such a view that God is a body. And he says that the vision of God is promised to us as a reward of faith. Certainly it may not be striking that he speaks of the exercises of the saints’ mind as trained to purposefully for attaining divine vision.

Letter 130, dating not much later than 411, was addressed to a wealthy Roman widow,

⁴¹ See Mandouze, *Prosopographie chrétienne du bas-empire*, I, 803-805; F. Morgenstern, *Die Briefpartner des Augustinus von Hippo*, 45-47.

⁴² Aug. *Ep.* 202A.2.6: ‘donec aut id quod volunt reperiant, aut ipsa inquisitione aciem mentis exercent’; WSA II/3, 364.

⁴³ See Mandouze, *Prosopographie chrétienne du bas-empire*, I, 460; F. Morgenstern, *Die Briefpartner des Augustinus von Hippo*, 77.

⁴⁴ See H. Chadwick, ‘New Letters of St. Augustine’, *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS, 34.2 (1983), 472-428; P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo. A Biography*. A New Edition with an Epilogue (Berkeley, 2000) 471-473.

⁴⁵ See Cicero, *De inuentione* 1.1 and Augustine’s *De doctrina christiana* 4.5.7.

⁴⁶ See Lancel, *Saint Augustine*, 238-239; F. Morgenstern, *Die Briefpartner des Augustinus von Hippo*, 89.

⁴⁷ Cf. *Letter* 147 addressed to Paulina in 413/414; *Retraciones* 2.41.

Anicia Proba Faltonia,⁴⁸ who had fled to North Africa when the Goths attacked Rome. The bishop of Hippo then, answering her question on the prayer to God, refers to the exercises of the mind by taking up the scriptural texts. The three passages given to her are 2 Corinthians 6:11, 1 Corinthians 2:9, and Romans 8:26. First, he stresses the discontinuity between our need for prayer and the knowability of God, ‘who knows what we need before we ask him’. In fact, although God cannot fail to know what we have need of, this is not enough: ‘our desire, by which we can receive what he prepares to give, to be exercised in prayers’.⁴⁹ This leads Augustine on to 2 Corinthians 6:11, ‘Make your heart bigger so that you do not bear that yoke with unbelievers’, which follows the explanation of the greatness of his gift as:

That which is, indeed, very great, ‘which the eye has not seen’, because it is not a color, ‘and the ear has not heard’, because it is not a sound, ‘nor has it ascended into the heart of a human being.’ (1 Cor. 2:9)⁵⁰

This view of the relation between the need for prayer to God (at all times) and its reward lies in fact at the centre of Augustine’s religious and eschatological aspect of these exercises.

Another text which is correlated with his view is Romans 8:26, ‘We do not know what we should pray for as we ought’, which would suppose those who do not know what benefit the vexations and troubles in this life provide. The belief in the magnificence of its reward occurs in the context of the exhortation to the prayer. Here, too, we find the statement that the affections, that is ‘the swelling of pride’ and ‘patience’, should be tested and exercised through the prayer in order to receive the greatness of the reward.

The next letter in the group under consideration, *Letter 131* to the same widow in 411/412, contains the same passage from Romans 8:28. In agreement with her comment that the corruptibility of the temporal body (*corpus corruptibile*) is the burden to the soul,⁵¹ Augustine resorts to the texts of Wisdom 9:15, ‘For the corruptible body weighs down the soul, and the earthly dwelling presses down the mind as it thinks of many things’. Again, he refers to the necessity of the exercises of our patience for ‘the hope of the world to come’.

Letter 137, written in 411/412 and addressed to the layman Volusianus,⁵² deals with the question of Christ of both divine and human nature. In the main part of this letter (§ 2-18),⁵³ Augustine gives a careful account of the grounds for the central Christian beliefs, among which are the miracles of Christ. His argument against those who do not believe in the greatness of his miracles moves on to the description of the history of Christian religion, in which he suggests that the persecution and heresies has emerged as the touchstone of its teaching: ‘In alternating times of adversity and of prosperity they vigilantly practice patience and temperance.’⁵⁴ And not only does he suggest the necessity of these exercises in the life

⁴⁸ See Lancel, *Saint Augustine*, 393; F. Morgenstern, *Die Briefpartner des Augustinus von Hippo*, 80.

⁴⁹ Aug. *Ep.* 130.8.17: ‘qui novit quid nobis necessarium sit, priusquam petamus ab eo . . . exerceri in orationibus desiderium nostrum, quo possimus capere quod praeparat dare.’; WSA II/2, 192.

⁵⁰ Aug. *Ep.* 130.8.17: ‘Tanto quippe illud quod valde magnum est, quod nec oculus vidit, quia non est color; nec auris audivit, quia non est sonus; nec in cor hominis ascendit.’; WSA II/2, 192.

⁵¹ See F. Van Fleteren, ‘Augustine’s Exegesis of Wisdom 9:15’, in: E. A. Livingstone (ed.), *Studia Patristica*, 27 (Leuven, 1993) 409-416.

⁵² See note 14.

⁵³ See G. O’Daly, *Augustine’s City of God: A Reader’s Guide* (Oxford, 1999) 33.

⁵⁴ Aug. *Ep.* 137.4.16: ‘Alternis adversitatibus et prosperitatibus rerum, patientiam et temperantiam vigilanter exercent’; WSA II/2, 222.

to come but he can even situate the practice of these exercises in the salvific functions of the Church, imperfect and uncertain though they be, as a foreshadowing of the true reward to come.

Letter 157, written in 414/415 and addressed to Hilary, a Catholic layman from Syracuse in Sicily, deals with a series of questions about some Pelagian teachings which he had asked for Augustine.⁵⁵ Part of his answer is that concerning the baptism of infants the Pelagians must not impede the salvation through the grace of Christ, and once again the focus is on the exercise of the faith.⁵⁶ For in the case of those who are redeemed by the death of Christ, for the time being the temporal death of the body remains and the exercise of their faith should not be taken away. The reign of death is ended in the renewal of the body that the resurrection promises.

3.3 The Exegetical Aspect of Spiritual Training

We come now to consider *Letters 28, 137, 149, and 199*, composed from 394 to seemingly 420, thus occurring sporadically in his episcopal period. The first of these, *Letter 28* is addressed to Jerome (dating between 394 and 395), who received this one of their correspondence only many years later after it had circulated in Rome and elsewhere.⁵⁷ Although he has been critical to Jerome's interpretation of Galatians (Gal. 2:11-14), in his greetings before getting down to business, Augustine praises for his diligent and 'liberal pursuit' of scriptures.⁵⁸ In accord with his expression, in *Letter 72* (dated to 403), Jerome has high praise for the exegete Augustine, for diligently and successfully engaging in the study of scriptures.⁵⁹

Second letter is *Letter 137*, as mentioned above, addressed to the layman Volusianus, was written in response to the christological questions in 411/412. After discussing the issue of the growth of the Christian religion, in the end of this letter, he turns to Christ's twofold commandment of love of God and of neighbour, in which all wisdom of philosophy are embodied. He refers then to the simplicity of the scriptural language in contrast with the hidden truth in the scriptures:

And it [sc. scripture] not only feeds them with the evident truth but also exercises them with the hidden truth, though it has the same truth in clear matters as in hidden ones. . . . By these, evil minds are salutarily corrected, little minds are fed, and great minds are delighted.⁶⁰

This is the place for both the unlearned and the learned to practice their exercises by approaching the 'lowly language' of the scriptures.

Next two letters, *Letter 149 and 199*, deal with the obscure passages found in the scriptures. First, *Letter 149*, among the correspondence between Augustine and Paulinus of Nola, was

⁵⁵ See F. Morgenstern, *Die Briefpartner des Augustinus von Hippo*, 93.

⁵⁶ See Aug. *Ep.* 157.3.19.

⁵⁷ See WSA II/1, 90; F. Morgenstern, *Die Briefpartner des Augustinus von Hippo*, 70-71. Cf. C. White, *The Correspondence (394-419) between Jerome and Augustine* (Lewiston, NY, 1990).

⁵⁸ Aug. *Ep.* 28.1.1: 'exercitatio liberalis'; WSA II/1, 91.

⁵⁹ See Jer. *Ep.* 105.2.3 (= Aug. *Ep.* 72.2.3).

⁶⁰ Aug. *Ep.* 137.5.18: 'sed invitat omnes humili sermone, quos non solum manifesta pascit, sed etiam secreta exercent veritate, hoc in promptis quod in reconditis habens. . . . His salubriter et prava corriguntur, et parva nutriuntur, et magna oblectantur ingenia.'; WSA II/2, 223.

written in 416 as reply to *Letter* 121 written by Paulinus, in approximately 413.⁶¹ Augustine's comprehensive response to the query contains the interpretation of difficult passages from Psalms (§ 3-10), Ephesians (§ 11), 1 Timothy (§ 12), Romans (§ 18-22), Colossians (§ 23-30), and the Gospel (§ 31-33). He closes the letter by explaining the significance of those interpretations connected with the exercises for the mind.

For, when you argue as you ask questions, you both ask with acuteness and teach with humility. It is useful, however, to discover many opinions on the obscure passages of the divine scriptures, which God wanted to be there in order to provide exercise for our minds, when different people have different views, though they are all nonetheless in accord with the teaching of sound faith.⁶²

The similar references to the meaning of scriptural interpretations are found in *Letter* 199, written to Hesychius, bishop of Salona in Dalmatia, who had asked him about the end of the world: to the letter, he refers in the *City of God* 20.5.4, which dated to 418-420.⁶³ In this long letter, being the size of a small treatise, Augustine attempts to interpret the Lord's eschatological discourse, thereby thinking carefully about which of those signs in various scriptural passages refers to which of those events at the second coming of the Lord.⁶⁴ Then, he warns him 'not to be content with their [scriptural] surface meaning',⁶⁵ because the exegete is required to exercise the mind by understanding the hidden meaning of the passages. The obscure passages in the scriptures express the intention of God, in which 'God has chosen to exercise our minds'.⁶⁶

Letter 213, prepared by Augustine as the record of the ecclesiastical proceedings, is not included in the letter properly speaking. On 26 September 426, he summoned his clergy and laity to the Basilica Pacis in Hippo in order to designate the priest Eraclius (Heraclius) as succeeding him in the bishopric.⁶⁷ And he intentionally produces this document so as to facilitate the change of leadership in the church and to remind Eraclius of this important ceremony. It may even be regarded as the remarkable testimony, not only because the ecclesiastical secretaries were faithfully and attentively noting these Acta, but also because it expresses Augustine's own hope with which he would commit himself to his concern in the rest of his life.

so that I at long last, if God grants me a little more time in this life, may not devote my remaining days to laziness or spend them in inactivity but may exercise my mind in the holy scriptures as much as he permits and grants.⁶⁸

Augustine denies that he retires from all administrative duties in the church and that new bishop should do them by himself alone. But, he asks his congregation's permission to turn

⁶¹ See F. Morgenstern, *Die Briefpartner des Augustinus von Hippo*, 40-42.

⁶² Aug. *Ep.* 149.3.34: 'Cum enim interrogando disputas, et quaeris acriter et doces humiliter. Vtile est autem ut de obscuritatibus divinarum Scripturarum, quas exercitationis nostrae causa Deus esse voluit, multae inveniantur sententiae, cum aliud alii videtur, quae tamen omnes sanae fidei doctrinaeque concordent.'; WSA II/2, 377.

⁶³ See Lancel, *Saint Augustine*, 370, 409; F. Morgenstern, *Die Briefpartner des Augustinus von Hippo*, 48.

⁶⁴ See Aug. *Ep.* 199.9.26.

⁶⁵ Aug. *Ep.* 199.11.42: 'nec earum superficie debemus esse contenti'; WSA II/3, 348.

⁶⁶ Aug. *Ep.* 199.11.45: 'nostras intellegentias Deo placuit exercere'; WSA II/3, 350.

⁶⁷ See Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 411-412; Lancel, *Saint Augustin*, 457-458.

⁶⁸ Aug. *Ep.* 213.6: 'et ego tandem aliquando, si quantulumcumque spatium mihi huius vitae donaverit Deus, ipsam meam quantulumcumque vitam non dem segnitiei, nec donem inertiae, sed in sanctis Scripturis, quantum ipse permittit et largitur, exerream'; WSA II/4, 35.

his mind to his own matter: 'Let no one, then, begrudge me my leisure, because my leisure will involve important work.'⁶⁹

4 CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Augustine's letters considered in this paper provide a wide spread more or less over his episcopal period with a sustained effort to encourage his correspondents to confirm the significance of spiritual training. However much one might naturally expect the evolution of Augustine's view of the exercises from the first half of the 390s until 428 (immediately before his death in 430), the evidence for multiple aspects of these exercises suggests that he seems to have avoided the development and change in his thought. Although he repeatedly turned to the epistolary conversation as a means for persuading his reader of the necessity of the discipline, it was not the major focus of his letters. Augustine did not write any letter devoted mainly to the issue of spiritual training. This does not mean, however, that his continual invitations had only limited significance for him and his reader. For instance, while some Christians were skilled at providing a rationale for their curiosity and intellectual interests, Augustine attempted to direct their attention to the correlation between the 'liberal pursuit' of scriptural passages and scriptural exegesis, thereby enabling them to follow and obey the scriptural injunction to serve one another in love: 'all successful biblical interpretation must result in ethically good behaviour: love towards God and one's neighbour.'⁷⁰ In fact, however, there were Christians whose religious identity was not in serious conflict with their social, cultural, and civic contact and network density. It looks as if they switched to different types of identity under different circumstances. Being confronted with the arbitrary choice of identities, 'Augustine does not agree with this' state of affairs.⁷¹ It is important to note that, because of his repeated claims in epistolary exchange to be open and circulated publicly (probably in small groups),⁷² Augustine's letters could serve as spiritual and pastoral resources in Hippo and other African communities and that, despite his determined efforts directed towards the practice of spiritual training which assists the spiritual improvement of his correspondents, it could not respond to the social realities in late antiquity. Thus, when one attempts to read his letters as a discourse for the improvement of the whole Christian community, his teaching of spiritual training would be considered to be a spiritual, but eventually failed device for connecting the personal discipline with communal salvation. As well as the confirmation of its role in helping the shared progress towards salvation, the spiritual training for every individual soul was expected to enhance their affectionate relationship.

⁶⁹ Augustine, *Ep.* 213.6: 'Nemo ergo invidet otio meo, quia meum otium magnum habet negotium.'; WSA II/4, 35.

⁷⁰ K. Pollmann, 'Augustine's Hermeneutics as a Universal Discipline?', in: K. Pollmann and M. Vessey (eds.), *Augustine and the Disciplines: From Cassiciacum to Confessions* (Oxford, 2005) 206-231 at 230.

⁷¹ É. Rebillard, 'Religious Sociology: Being Christian in the Time of Augustine', 51.

⁷² See J. Ebbeler, *Disciplining Christians*, 15.