

The Emergence of Poverty in Augustine's Early Works

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INTRODUCTION

When Augustine was born at Thagaste in 354, the town had been a *municipium* for about two centuries. It was a self-governing community where all free men were Roman citizens. His father, Patricius' social standing was of the *honestiores* who were liable for civic obligations in order to be members of his town's *cūria*. The financial situation of Patricius is difficult to determine. Augustine himself might see it differently: Patricius could not simply be seen to be impecunious among the wealthy. Apart from Augustine's hesitation there may be in this, his father would not have been well-off.

Yet, among impoverished gentleness in a small town, Patricius made sacrifices to ensure his son's pursuit of career advancement which would be realised through a classical education. He could also obtain sponsorship from a wealthy relative, Romanianus. About three or four years spent in Madauros Augustine excelled in the programme of grammar and rhetoric notwithstanding, at the age of fifteen he came back to Thagaste. Because his father had to put aside enough money to provide higher education at Carthage. Only after a year, fortunately, Augustine could go there to complete his training. Although 'periodic liquidity problem' resulted from bad harvests might arise Patricius' difficulty raising funds, it also suggests the vulnerable position in which many in late antiquity could be made poor by debt. Was Augustine frightened by the dangerous symptom of poverty? Was he disappointed with a small property of provincial petit bourgeois? If he remained his native town, he would have to bear the burden which had already overwhelmed his family. He would have to face the weariness of a small world.

Illustrations showing how Augustine refers to poverty from his youth may be taken from his early writings before *Confessions*, written between 386 and 399. It would seem that he understands being poor not only in a literal but in a figurative way. Yet, I said above that his youth was under the sinister shadow of poverty. Our attention, thus, needs to be paid to the instances in which being poor is the focus of spiritual agenda as well as instances in which the poor are full members of the Christian community. Augustine uses poverty as a synonym for the virtue of humility. And, he does not affirm that poverty guarantees the possession of this virtue. How does he provide the theological basis for which the truly poor are defined as those who possess wealth in this life? In this paper I shall examine the way in which Augustine draws the poverty into relationship with its spiritual aspect, so revealing a theological viewpoint of the fellowship, by which the distance between poor and rich will disappear.

AUGUSTINE'S FIRST DESCRIPTIONS OF THE POOR AND POVERTY (386–392)

My first account of poverty and the poor covers the period up to 392. It may be said at the outset that Augustine does not offer extended description of the poor. Although he provides the brief glimpse into the existence of the poor, they are shown only in the most general terms as being in need: they are *mendicans*, *pauper*, or *egentes*.

In the second book of *De moribus*, Augustine rebukes the Manichaeans for their moral errors, which were classified under three 'seals' enjoined on the Manichaean Elect. If their seal of the lips means abstinence from meat and wine, why do they forbid 'to give to a beggar who is not a Manichean bread or anything made of grain or even water, which is inexpensive for everyone'? Again, if the needy were almost starving to death, why do they encourage the practice of alms by giving them money? Augustine attacks Manichaeans for promoting what he regards as a counterfeit of the virtue of mercy: 'this is certainly ... false mercy and true cruelty'.

Similarly, when he advocates different types of almsgiving in *De moribus* and *De utilitate credendi*, Augustine refers to the needy as recipients of alms. In the first text he highly praises the goodness of the lives of those who have abandoned the world for the common life of monasteries. For, 'so greatly do they strive not to have an abundance remain in their hands that they even send loaded ships to those places where the needy dwell'. In the second text it is not only appealing the almsgiving, but is concerned with incorporating it within the apex of the virtue of generosity—'generosity even to the point of distributing one's inheritance to the poor, in short, disdain for this world even to the point of desiring death'.

The general impression given in these instances is that Augustine restrains from presenting the poor in terms of their social identity, by not telling us a social stratum in which they are delineated with further specification. While showing the unspecified portrayal of the poor, his primary concern would be to characterise the donor's attitude as well as practice of almsgiving. And it should be qualified under *miser cordia*.

Hence, those who dutifully and humbly provide all these means by which such evils and difficulties are warded off are called merciful (*miser cors*), ... For who can fail to know that mercy (*miser cordia*) received its name because it makes miserable the heart of a person who suffers along with another's woes?

Augustine also stated, however, 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'. The most crucial 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 the behaviour. Confronted with what matters most to the donor of almsgiving, Augustine emphasises the need of pedagogical discipline for the health 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 we teach people to do them, we assist the mind with instruction.

The passage suggests that almsgiving is promoted in the double context of the worthy recipient and the virtuous donor. The beneficiary is again seen as being needy in general arising from material deprivation. To be so indefinite would be Augustine's intention that almsgiving sets a frame of instruction on the part of the donor. Almsgivers' respected virtue can be secured only by responding to the exhortation to exercise their state of mind in the practice of almsgiving.

We are reminded of another distinctive *topos* of poverty found in Augustine's early works, in which he also invites the readers to see the 'poverty' in its spiritual aspect. Such language is the common idiom of ancient philosophical discourse. For soul's poverty and indigence as an expression of nothingness and the reward of injustice stand in the Porphyrian tradition. The thesis that 'the soul has no other nourishment than knowledge and the understanding of things' derives from an image of Plato's *Phaedrus*, amplified by Cicero and Plotinus. Elsewhere he speaks of soul's movement in all directions away from the one, with the result that soul 'attain nothing but poverty'. The more the soul is detracted by multiple pursuits, the more it is impoverished. Augustine's pursuit of poverty is in fact to describe the unhappiness in terms of combining its crucial component, the neediness and poverty, with the folly, a combination which suggests another triad, that is the happiness, riches or fullness, and wisdom. Setting poverty against riches, the indigence consists in lacking the wisdom. The *beata vita* or wisdom consists in possessing this riches that alone serves to the ultimate purpose of soul. What I find intriguing is that where Augustine encourages his readers to turn away from the excesses of passions and redirect soul's attitude to wisdom, he expects to imagine the necessity of exercising the state of mind. It is in common with his consideration of donors' attitude.

AUGUSTINE'S SECOND DESCRIPTIONS OF THE POOR AND POVERTY (393-399)

We shall now turn to the texts in the next stage, in which Augustine endeavours to set out the theological condition of being poor. How does he make it possible? I shall restrict my examples to *De sermone domini in monte*, in which Augustine provides a programme of virtuous life crowned by the promise of a heavenly reward. With constructing the basis for a model of almsgiving, he interprets the Matthaean version of the sermon on the mount.

Augustine attends to certain characteristics of the blessed in the Matthaean beatitudes.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. We read in the Scriptures concerning the craving for temporal things: *All is vanity and presumption of spirit. Presumption of spirit* means boldness and haughtiness. ... *the poor in spirit* are rightly understood here as the

humble and those who fear God, that is, those who do not have an inflated spirit. And there could be no more felicitous beginning of blessedness, whose ultimate goal is perfect wisdom: *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom*. Whereas, on the contrary, we have the attribution: *The beginning of all sin is pride*. Let, therefore, the haughty seek and love the kingdom of the earth; but *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*.

The 'poor in spirit' are clearly defined as 'the humble and those who fear God', in contrast to the haughty who strives after temporal things. And the beatitude is granted to those who practice the requisite morality. This passage makes clear Augustine's hermeneutic principle of the 'poor' in *De sermone*. For this understanding of the 'poor' has two coherent and integrated approaches in its spiritual dimension. First, he makes concordant appeal to Sirach, when he refers to Matthew 5:3. The interpretation of the virtue of humility goes on to correlate with 'the fear of God' and to confirm how readily do the 'poor in spirit' stand on the initial step towards wisdom. And, in reference to other passages, Romans and the sevenfold gifts of the holy spirit in Isaiah 11:2, the honourable status of the poor is precisely given. The 'poor' are definitely spiritualised whose primary concern is with the afterlife. Those so named are encouraged to ascend the sevenfold grades towards their perfection, since their ascent was fully endorsed by the prophet Isaiah who has already taken his descending step. Here we see the theological value of the poor in rendering it possessing the virtue of humility and the expectation of future perfection: the praiseworthy are to grow in those 'whose soul is submissive to divine authority'.

Second, Augustine consistently speaks of the poor awaiting their future as poor. Another related terms as the needy and beggar are used exclusively in the second book of *De sermone*. It is indeed noticeable to what extent he continues to discuss another problematic of poverty: the intention and attitude of almsgiver to the recipients of alms. In Matthew 6, three religious practices are treated: that is almsgiving, prayer, and fasting. These verses cause the serious difficulty of fulfilling divine command to practice them in secret. How will it be done? Yet, it may be worth noting that Augustine would rather take alternate path in concentrating on the internal aspect of almsgiving: 'Therefore not what one does, but with that intention he does it, is the thing to consider'. So does he interpret these verses in a figurative way.

there seems no more logical explanation than that the 'left hand' stands for just this delight in praise. The 'right hand' signifies the determination (*intentio*) to carry out the divine precepts.

Let your alms, therefore, be in your own inner self, where many a one gives alms through his good will even if he has no money or anything else to give to the needy.

What happens here is that the internalisation so insisted upon by Augustine's exposition would not be the rapid promotion of almsgiving. We may notice, in fact, that the detailed figures of poor are strictly limited. I realise that it indicates another way of minimising and purging the distance between the donor and recipient. Just as the language of pedagogical discipline above mentioned exhorts the reader to exercise their

own state of mind, so, too, does this language of stressing motivation urge the almsgivers to cleanse and purify their heart.

If a plebeian should receive express permission from a senator of more advanced age to call him father, he would quite certainly become excited and would hardly dare do so, aware of his lowly origin and his lack of means and his own ordinary person. How much greater, then should be our trepidation in calling God *Father* if we are so tainted and debased of character that God might much more justly keep these qualities from contact with Himself than the senator the poverty of some nondescript beggar! For, indeed, the senator is repulsing in the beggar the status to which he himself might come through the precariousness of human fortunes, whereas God never lapses into baseness of character. ... Here there is also an admonition to the rich and to those who in the eyes of the world are well-born, that when they become Christians they are not to lord it over the poor and the lowly.

The passage exceptionally represents the noble, the poor, and the lowly from a given social stratum. Yet, the social gulf between the better-off and the poor is less likely to be an indication of raising alms for the needy. Augustine measures the strength of contempt easily excited against the beggar. The admonition instead sets the entire members of the Christian community under a common head: 'they recognize that they are their brothers'. I suppose here that the discourse of benefactors' intention reveal less about the poor and very poor than it does about humble fellowship of almsgivers with the beneficiaries.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Augustine's early works do not show the accurate and graphical figures of the poor and very poor of the North African community in the late fourth century. Although many in the community were exposed by the impoverishment and Augustine might not forgotten about his fear of falling below the threshold of poverty, the poor lay behind the theoretical account of poverty as the obstacles to human perfection and the explanations of almsgiver's intention as the aid for humble fellowship between the poor and the rich. It would be noteworthy that Augustine's central concern proceeds from the exhortation to spiritual exercise for soul's impoverishment towards the admonition to humble attitude about members of the Christian community. Yet paradoxically, his examination points of poverty would be in the opposite direction. And, I see the further theological basis for the truly poor not only in the humility and their awaiting perfection, but in the fraternal identity as members of the ideal community.

Of all those who are capable of enjoying God together with us, we love some whom we are helping, and some who are helping us; some whose help we need and some whose needs we are meeting; some to whom we give no benefit and some by whom we do not expect any benefit to be given to us. But it should be our desire that they all love God together with us, and all the help that we give to or receive from them must be related to this one end.