

## Spiritual Exercises in the Sermons of Augustine

Naoki KAMIMURA, Tokyo Gakugei University

### INTRODUCTION

The intention of this paper is to examine the 'spiritual exercises' in the sermons of Augustine, an expression which may at first be perplexing nowadays, when we use the word 'spiritual' and define it as a 'metamorphosis of our personality'. Although the exercises in question are set in the very context of a Greco-Roman philosophical tradition, it may seem to have been legitimate to point to the spiritual exercises as something to which the later western mystics like Ignatius of Loyola's *Exercitia spiritualia* predominantly belong. If there are many explanations connected with the aspects of the reality, how do they differ from that of later mystics? These exercises indeed correlate closely with *a way of being* in its existential dimension, thereby conforming to the spirit in its totality. They are devoted to effecting a 'profound transformation of the individual's mode of seeing and being' within the world. Above all, the word 'spiritual' reveals the overall scope of these exercises.

As to the question, 'how does they differ?', it may be significant that Ignatius' *Exercitia spiritualia* were deeply concerned about the problem of *askesis*. The idea of *askesis* which should be viewed as working within the Christian tradition is asceticism. It is 'the complete abstinence or restriction in the use of food, drink, sleep, dress, and property, and especially continence in sexual matters.' However, the references to *askesis* made by Ignatian meditations have much in common with ancient philosophical description of *askesis* exclusively rendered as spiritual exercises. Moreover, the similarities in the thought and the terminology between his *exercitium spirituale* and that of early Latin Christianity are evident. It can thus be shown that his *Exercita* were more closely linked to the exercises, thereby following the philosophical tradition of antiquity, rather than being in friction with them. Indeed, Ignatian meditations serve as a Christian modification of the exercises in ancient philosophical tradition.

This modification of *askesis* appears to be the result of reflection in late antiquity. More specifically, in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, Christians began to pursue the matter in a more detailed way than heretofore. It seems that a crucial stage of development was prepared by the thought of Augustine. In showing in what ways this was done, Augustine's sermons may provide us the ways of appreciating the spiritual exercises. Christian preaching in this period has chosen the word 'homilia' and 'sermo' to express its own activity of whatever kind: the general pattern would be modified such as conversational, dialectic, catechetical, exegetical, hortatory, instructional, and so on. Although the question of what conditions constitute Christian preaching in this period

is a matter of debate, it seems to have been indispensable both for making known the communication of God's word to believers within the Christian assembly (regardless of whether it was written or delivered) and for seeing the enormous output of his sermons as the testimonies of the development of his thought concerning scriptural exegesis and moral exhortations. Thus, I shall focus on the evidence for his views of the exercises over the course of his life. For the sake of clarity, I have divided the sermons along thematic lines into two groups, and in each group I shall consider them chronologically as far as possible.

#### THE ASCETIC AND INTELLECTUAL ASPECT OF THESE EXERCISES

The first sermon to be considered is *Sermo* 50, dating from the period before 396 (391-393 or 394-395), against the Manichaeans, in which Augustine expounds the passage from Haggai 2:8 'The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts.' Although the place in which he preached this sermon cannot be determined, it is clearly admitted that Augustine begins by criticising Manichaean exegesis for simply comparing the outwardly contradicting verses. While pointing to the Mammon of iniquity in Luke 16:9 as driving the avarice, Manichaeans regards it as the seemingly earthly property in Haggai 2:8. But, Augustine's reply to their criticism against the prophet indicates another way of finding the significance of having worldly possession.

As the divine justice distributes its property, good deeds are thereby publicized and sins are thereby punished. Gold and silver, you see, and every kind of earthly possession are both a means of exercising humanity and of punishing greed. (*Sermo* 50.3, trans. E. Hill, WSA 3/2 (1990) 345)

*Mine, he says, is the gold and mine is the silver, not yours, you wealthy ones of the earth.* (*Sermo* 50.2, trans. Hill, WSA 3/2, 344)

This possession has to be seen as the one that God bestowed them. His solution to this puts an emphasis on offering the possibility that all humanity would be exercised by sharing of their 'earthly' property without imposing severe constraints on themselves. Although his exhortation to sharing of their property does not compel his congregations to do total renunciation, it is not their real possessions that Augustine provides close attention to but the nature of their soul's disposition. Clearly does he refer to the significance of the ascetic aspect of the 'spiritual exercises'.

Next I shall examine the *Sermo* 70, dating in 398 (supposed to be dated in 2 February 413 by O. Perler), preached at Carthage, contains the exposition of the words from Matthew 11:28-30, thereby following the *Sermo* 69 on the same passage. In this short sermon, after revealing profound insights into how the Apostle had to have all those terrible and bitter experiences which are taken from two passages of 2 Corinthians (6:4, 11:24-25), Augustine shows his hearers the manifold works of the Spirit the Apostle had with him: 'how comfortable was the yoke of Christ he [Apostle] bore, and how light the

load' (*Sermo* 70.2, trans. Hill, WSA 3/3 (1991) 240) And he stirs up his congregations' minds by showing them the burdensome requirements imposed by their daily lives: the laborious works of the soldier, merchant, and hunter. It is noteworthy, however, that here Augustine adds an example of the burden which would not be grouped into the same category.

To what torments of almost daily bearings are the tender years of children subjected! Again, how they are kept at work in schools, and harried with long hours and short rations—not to learn wisdom but to learn the use of numbers and letters and clever tricks of argument for the sake of accumulating empty riches and honors. (*Sermo* 70.2, trans. Hill, WSA 3/3 (1991) 240)

This serves to remind us of not the harsh realities of his assembly but of the educational experiences during Augustine's schooldays. Although he may be critical both of its object as well as of the strenuous form of these exercises, the fact that at this stage he abruptly brings up the pedagogical aspect of these exercises does not invalidate the useful functions of these exercises. But, a further discussion cannot be detected from this sermon.

Sermon 9, preached around 420 in Carthage (cf. M. Pontet; Chusa, by C. Lambot et al.), provides a long exposition of the Ten Commandments, in which Augustine takes its cue from the ten strings of the harp in Psalm 143 (144):9 'O God, I will sing you a new song, on a harp of ten strings I will play to you.' When he comes to offer the interpretation of the passage from Matthew 5:25 'Come to an agreement with your adversary quickly', once again he indicates the ways of purifying the soul through the ascetic exercises, thereby provoking his congregations onto almsgiving which is accompanied by some obligations such as the fasting and prayer.

If any pleasure of the world creep into your thoughts, school yourselves in works of mercy, school yourselves in almsgiving, in fasting, in prayer. These are the means of purging ourselves of the daily sins which we cannot help creeping into our thoughts because of our human weakness. (*Sermo* 9.17, trans. Hill, WSA 3/1 (1990) 274)

The last sermon examined in this section is *Sermo* 347, unfortunately its date uncertain, treats with the fear of God so often mentioned in the scriptures. He takes up and interprets the passage from Psalm 111:10 'The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom'. His understanding of the wisdom granted only to those who fear God in the observance of the justice would help to confirm that the soul must ascend from the fear of God towards wisdom through the seven distinctive stages. The scriptural evidence for soul's ascension is provided from Isaiah 11:2-3 in which the prophet enumerates seven spiritual gifts in descending order. He asks the assembly, 'where do we have to climb to?':

What can this place be, but the place of rest and peace? There, you see, is to be found that bright and never fading wisdom. So it was to exercise us in successive steps of doctrine that Isaiah came

down from wisdom to fear, from the place, that is, of everlasting peace to the vale of time-bound tears; ... (*Sermo* 347.2, trans. Hill, WSA 3/10 (1995) 88)

In fact we find here the view that defines the ascending steps towards the wisdom as these exercises. This ascension clarifies how the soul directs itself to God and seeks its own purification. Humbled in the fear of God, the soul undertakes the hard tasks of penetrating spiritual realities under the guidance of spiritual gifts. With all the movements of the soul, it finally approaches its purification and holds fast to the 'full and everlasting peace'. (*Sermo* 347.3) Although it is not clear whether he believes that the union with God is possible for us in this life, Augustine explicitly uses the 'spiritual exercises' to express the whole process of soul's purification to God.

#### THE EXEGETICAL ASPECT OF THESE EXERCISES

We come now to consider a group of sermons which, composed from 403 to 428, pertain to Augustine's exegetical dimension of these exercises. It includes *Sermo* 4, 23, 32, 71, 80, 140, 156, and 363. For the sake of argument, I tentatively classify them into three distinct, but mutually related types of descriptions.

The first group of these is concerned with these exercises in general and refers to the effects of these exercises. *Sermo* 71, dating between 417 and 420, deals with the difficult problem derived from the passages of Matthew 12:32 'Whoever speaks a word against the holy spirit will not be forgiven, neither in this age nor in the age to come.' Augustine takes up twice the strength of these exercises in this sermon, when he encounters considerable difficulty in exploring the meaning of the texts.

Obviously, what he [sc. God] wanted to do was to exercise our minds with a difficult problem not to deceive us with a false statement. (*Sermo* 71.10, trans. Hill, WSA 3/3, 251)

Actually in the whole wide field of the holy scriptures we are nourished by the passages that are clear, exercised by those that are obscure; the first kind relieve us from hunger, the second save us from boredom. (*Sermo* 71.11, trans. Hill, WSA 3/2, 252)

It is significant that Augustine articulates the effects of scriptural interpretation. Although he does not give any further explanation, it might be sufficient for him to encourage his assembly to think over the difficulties in the scriptures. The similar reference to its effect is found in *Sermo* 363, preached probably in Hippo Regius around 414. At the very beginning of this short sermon, once again he shows the double consequences of the exegesis.

we may deal faithfully both with what is said clearly for the purpose of giving us spiritual nourishment, and what is said obscurely in order to give us spiritual exercise. (*Sermo* 363.1, trans. Hill, WSA 3/10, 270)

The second group is concerned with the well-known contrast between the literal and spiritual interpretations. First, in the *Sermo* 32, preached at the shrine of Saint Cyprian

in Carthage in 403, Augustine speaks of the different kinds of the scriptural texts: one is difficult to find out the hidden meanings in the texts, and the other is to be treated more easily. Although the Psalm 144 includes many hidden meanings in it, which will be treated hereafter in the sermon, Augustine encourages his congregations to overcome the difficulties.

*Sermo 23*, preached at the Faustus Basilica in Carthage in 413, followed by the *Sermo 53*, treats with the vision of God. It is interesting that Augustine starts with the passage from 2 Timothy 3:16 'Every divinely inspired scripture is useful for teaching, for reproving, for exhortation, for doctrine.' Although we cannot interpret the scriptural texts at all, we have no ground for accusing it. Thus, he regards the 'mental exercises' as those that prepare the exegetes to interpret spiritually the texts 'in a crude, materialistic way in many places'. Again he appeals to the scriptural evidence:

For the law is spiritual, but I am carnal (Rom 7:14)

Since the difficulties experienced by him in interpreting the scriptures are serious, he might be forced to understand the necessity and scope of these exercises.

*Sermo 4*, probably preached before 420, gives the hearers a considerable long commentary on Esau and Jacob in Genesis 27:1-40, which he himself admits at the end of the sermon (4.36). At the beginning of the sermon (4.1), before entering into the discussion of the issues, Augustine compares two contrasted method for interpreting the scriptural texts: one is 'carnal', that is, 'literally' and the other is 'spiritually'. This distinction has been repeatedly referred to in his expositions of the method for reading the scriptures. Here Augustine defines the 'exercises of our minds' (*exercitatio animae*) as those that give adequate training to enable the mind of the exegetes to make sense of what they do not yet understand. This is the same case as that shown in the *Sermo 32* and *23*.

*Sermo 140*, preached about 428 on Christmas day, shows us in general the correlation between the exercises of the mind and the scriptural interpretation. This sermon explicates the words from the gospel of John and, at the end of the sermon, Augustine considers how the gospel 'puts our minds through their paces, planes them smooth and defleshes them'. (*Sermo 140.6*, trans. Hill, WSA 3/4 (1992), 406) Here again, the spiritual interpretation is conflicted with that of the 'carnaliter' (carnally and literally).

The third group of these is characterised from the different viewpoints of the cases: in which places the descriptions of these exercises are given. First, in the *Sermo 80*, preached probably in 410, before approaching the passages from Matthew 17:18-20, Augustine alludes twice to Matthew 7:7 'Ask and you shall receive, seek and you shall find, knock, and it will be opened'. (*Sermo 80.1, 80.2*) He insists that his congregations would grasp as true what is spoken in the scriptures. He also expects them to be humble when they encounter the difficult passages of the scriptures.

See how they were carrying their hears, so to say, to the wellhead, and knocking to get it opened up, so that they may fill them up there. He wanted to make them knock at his door in order to

exercise them in desiring, not to rebuff them in their knocking. (*Sermo* 80.1, trans. Hill, WSA 3/3, 350)

The humble submission to the scriptures affords the devotees the possibility to be exercised through the act of interpreting the texts.

Once again, in the conclusion of the *Sermo* 71, as mentioned above, he speaks of these exercises for the pious and devotional exegetes, then assigns two different tasks to them: one is 'to see that needed to be understood', and the other 'to explain it if I did understand'. (*Sermo* 71.38, trans. Hill, WSA 3/2, 270)

At the beginning of the *Sermo* 156, preached two days after *Sermo* 155 in 419, is concerned with these exercises in general and refers to the effects of these exercises. Augustine makes an allusion to the passage from Matthew 7:7, as mentioned above in *Sermo* 80.

The depths of meaning in the word of God are there to excite our eagerness to study, not to prevent us from understanding. If everything was locked up in riddles, there would be no clue to the opening up of obscure passages. Again, if everything was hidden, there would be nothing for the soul to derive nourishment from, and so gain the strength which would enable it to knock at the closed doors. (*Sermo* 156.1, trans. Hill, WSA 3/5 (1992), 96)

It is significant that, either at the beginning of these sermons or at the concluding sections, we find the references to these exercises not only in *Sermo* 80, 71, and 156, but in *Sermo* 32, 156, and 363.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The sermons we have considered so far give a wide spread more or less over almost all of his episcopal period, that are dated to the period from 396 to 428. In these two groups, we have not obtained the confirmation of a development in his thought. There is the earliest evidence in which Augustine exhorts his congregations to share the possessions with the poor, thereby practicing these exercises, in which we clearly find its ascetic dimension. (*Sermo* 50 in 396) But, his sustained effort into the same exercises remains in his later sermon. (*Sermo* 9 in 420) It is noteworthy that his instruction centres around the well-known theme. (*Sermo* 347) Although we do not have any chronological evidence for it, it is clearly admitted that he subsumes the 'spiritual exercises' into the ascending stages of soul's purification towards the contemplation of wisdom.

The most distinguished aspect of these exercises in his sermons is the exegetical one. Augustine repeatedly expresses his concern about a high reward of these exercises, thereby admonishing his assembly for interpreting the difficult passages. Also accepted is the statement that these exercises give adequate training to permit the mind of the exegetes to make sense of what they do not yet understand. We often find his interest in the exegetical method — the contrast between the 'literally' and the 'spiritually'.

The explanation given for the spiritual exercises is not the major focus of Augustine's sermons, or rather seems to be inserted between the substance of these sermons. He did not preach any sermon devoted mainly to these exercises. This does not mean, however, that the description of these exercises has only the limited significance for Augustine and his congregations. Indeed he often refers to these exercises at the beginning and/or the end of his sermons, thereby attempting to give them a further and renewed impetus for the progress of their thought and practice. Despite these exercises are limited to some of his sermons, Augustine's explanation of these exercises seems to serve to fasten their affectionate spiritual relationships.