

Augustine's Interpretation of a Passage from Romans in his Early Works

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In *Confessions*, after describing the famous 'tolle lege' incident in a garden at Milan, Augustine told his readers that he happened to read a codex of Paul's letters and took the 'first heading I cast my eyes upon' (*Conf.* 8.12.29). This passage from Romans 13:13-14 provides a scriptural warrant for his renunciation of the world. His reading may have had considerable significance for his conversion. However, it is generally accepted that, prior to the period when he starts writing *Confessions*, Augustine's works are intentionally silent and reveal a remarkable indifference to this crucial passage. While he writes some different kinds of commentary on the Pauline epistles shortly before his consecration as bishop, it does not feature in any notable way for at least some ten years after the composition of *Confessions*. What does the early Augustine think about this decisive passage? Is there any substantial progress in his understanding of Romans 13:13-14? Or does he approach this passage from an entirely different viewpoint? It is my intention in this paper to consider his view of this passage in some of his early writings.

RECENT CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM OF AUGUSTINE'S USE OF ROMANS 13:13-14

Many studies on Augustine's conversion scene have not offered a perceptive and constructive discussion of his use of Romans 13:13-14, of which hardly anything is known in his writings preceding *Confessions*, except for one of his early letters, that is, *Letter 22*. Because of its importance for a consideration of what meaning he gave to this passage before committing himself to his eventual conversion in *Confessions* 8.12.28-30, some scholars are concerned to discuss the implications of the use of Romans 13:13-14 in *Letter 22*. Some of the other studies on his conversion prefer to suggest how the problems Augustine was faced with in Paul's admonition in this passage were interwoven with difficulties concerning the renunciation of the world.

Leo C. Ferrari's insightful studies of Augustine's conversion scene have thoroughly attempted to argue that, provided that prior to *Confessions* Augustine was little stimulated by the Pauline passages, the famous conversion scene was 'obviously quite fundamentally fictional in nature'. Although Ferrari does not ignore the reference to Romans 13:13-14 in *Letter 22*, he explains that the use of Romans in this letter would be intended to condemn moral lapses and blasphemy of the African church. Therefore, it does not contribute significantly to the consideration of Augustine's use of Pauline texts

in the conversion scene. With regard to the indifference to Romans 13:13-14 in *Letter 22*, Ferrari's view is similar to that of Paula Fredriksen, who explores the possibility of rendering Augustine's early accounts of his conversion in the Cassiciacum dialogues consistent with his later representation of his conversion in *Confessions*. Fredriksen takes much notice of the Paul illustrated in Acts than what Augustine made of his own personal narrative in *Confessions*, thereby facilitating the construction of 'his description from his reading of Acts 9'. Indeed, Augustine seems to have given his conversion narrative along with Paul's story. Although, according to Fredriksen, 'a theological reinterpretation of a past event' in *Confessions* provides us a clear account of his conversion scene, her argument for Augustine's conversion hinges upon the unwarranted assumption of its connection with his reading of Acts. Nowhere does Augustine offer any/possible interpretation of Acts 9, which may be stimulus for his idea of the conversion scene.

One of the most thoughtful comments on his use of Romans 13:13-14 comes from Felix Baffour Asare Asiedu's 'Paul and Augustine's Retrospective Self: The Relevance of *Epistula XXII*.' His attention to Augustine's use of Romans in *Letter 22* enables us to appreciate the significance of the background for *Letter 22*, thereby apparently giving a positive value to Augustine's Milanese experience. Given the situation of being forcibly ordained as a priest in Hippo (391), around the time when he wrote *Letter 21* to Valerius, bishop of Hippo, Augustine intentionally stayed away from Hippo. During his absence from the Catholic community of Hippo, not only does he spend his precious time 'studying the Sacred Scriptures', but entered into the preparation of his new role as a priest and the reflection upon his past experiences, and concerning many of which he would provide fuller descriptions later in *Confessions*. Consequently, as Asiedu explains, in *Letter 22*, we catch 'a fascinating glimpse into aspects of Augustine's past and his understanding of the inextricable link between his conversion and the vocation he had now entered'. Augustine has already suggested the 'inextricable link' between his conversion narrative and the passage of Romans in *Letter 22*.

AUGUSTINE'S USE OF ROMANS 13:13-14 REVISITED

In his early writings prior to *Confessions*, despite of the fact that Romans 13:13-14 scarcely appears, there remains a certain though small number of cases in which Augustine makes partial quotations from this scriptural verse. What does the scarcity of his use of the passage mean? Does Augustine deliberately refer to Romans 13:13-14 in his early writings?

With reference to his earlier idea about the Christian life it is interesting to note that, in a significant passage of *On Order* (386), one of the Cassiciacum dialogues, Augustine refers to this view as a double order of the discipline, that is, 'of life' and 'of learning', depending on his interpretation of divine order.

To those who wish to know it, this discipline imposes a double order: of life and of learning. You, its youthful students, must begin by abstaining from sex, from the

enticement of gluttony and drunkenness, the immodest undue care of body and dress, vain sports and games, the torpor of excess sleep and laziness, ill-natured rivalry, detraction, envy, ambition for office and power, down to excessive desire for simple praise. (*On Order* 2.8.25)

The idea of the moral prescription being dependent on the immutability of divine order has already being expressed in a similar form in the prefatory letters of Cassiciacum dialogues (*Against the Academicians* 2.2.5 and *The Happy Life* 1.4), which is why Augustine refers to it here as a particularly personal resonance for him. If we compare it with the passage of Romans 13:13-14, it is noticeable that all the moral lapses appear, though expressed in a variety of ways:

Not in riotousness and drunkenness (A), not in lewdness and wantonness (B), not in strife and rivalry (C); but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh and its lusts (D). (Rom 13:13-14 in *Conf.* 8.12.29)

abstaining from sex (B'), from the enticement of gluttony and drunkenness (A'), the immodest undue care of body and dress (D'),... ill-natured rivalry, detraction, envy (C'), ... (*On Order* 2.8.25)

Thus, with further allusions to his struggle against the secular ambitions from his youth —'ambition for office and power, down to excessive desire for simple praise'—, he attempts to read Romans 13:13-14 as a divine admonition with which Augustine and his friends are exhorted to observe the commandment of love, that is, of God and of neighbours, thereby receiving instructions for their renunciation and exemplary purity of life. He links his reading of Romans with what his group experienced in Milan: Alypius' renunciation of the world, Augustine's conversion experience, and their readings of Romans.

In the book 2 of *Catholic Way of Life and the Manichean Way of Life* (written in 387/388), as far as I have been able to ascertain, Augustine's direct and the earliest reference to a part of Romans 13:13-14 is found: 'Do not make provision for the flesh with its concupiscences' (Rom 13:14 in *De moribus* 2.31). After sketching the contours of the problematics generated by Manichaeism, he describes in detail their moral errors classified under three false symbols: of the lips, of the hands, and of the breast. Concerning the seal of the lips, Augustine claims that the Manichaeism 'Elect' who practise abstinence from meat and some wine would satisfy the appetite for further indulgence. Thus, in quoting from both Romans 13:14 and the whole of Romans 14 (and the long passages from 1 Corinthians 8:4-13 and 10:19-11:1), he provides the rationale for abstinence, focusing on the control of the desire for sensual delight. It is interesting to note that in his other anti-Manichaeism treatise, *Answer to Adimantus* (394), he criticises Manichaeism, and again quotes from both the whole of Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 10:19-31 (*Contra Adimantum* 14.1-2). It is the harmony and compatibility between the scriptural passages seemingly opposed to one another which is crucial, in contrast with their reading of single passages out of its context. These

references here are inspired by the context of Pauline theology that describes what he takes to be the difficulty with worldly renunciation.

Letter 22 was written in between 391 and 393, before Augustine's return to Hippo to perform his pastoral duties with the congregations of the church. Because Valerius accepted his request for his study of scripture, Augustine deepened a sense of his pastoral vocation as a priest. It is generally admitted that, in this letter addressed to Aurelius, bishop of Carthage, Augustine managed to face the difficulties of the Christian life in Africa. Indeed, he says to Aurelius that 'by your earnestness the many carnal diseases and illnesses that the African church suffers in many' would be cured (*Ep. 22.1.2*). And at the beginning of this letter, in the confident hope of receiving Aurelius' reply, Augustine informs him of Alypius' outstanding personality at their monastic community in Thagaste, from which Augustine would move to Hippo. Why does he refer to Alypius' life of renunciation as an example to their fellows? If he does so in order to draw a sharp distinction between his renunciation and the lack of interest in some of the vices shown by the Africans, this in not made sufficiently clear is what he says about the concurrent action of the African church. It is true that Augustine would rather stress his personal deficiency and compare the limited practice of the African church with what he found in the church of Italy (*Ep. 22.1.4*). Here Augustine appears to mingle his personal experiences with his solicitude for the troubles in Africa, for which he decides to take on his duties as a priest. Before quoting the passage of Romans 13:13-14 as a tripartite injunction against the church, he makes an illuminating comment: 'the apostle briefly mentioned in one passage three kinds of vices that are to be detested and avoided and from which there arises a crop of countless vices.' (*Ep. 22.1.2*) This remark represents significantly his own struggle against sensual desires in Milan. It is consequently clear that, Alypius' exemplary mode of life, Christian spirituality Augustine encountered in Italy, his consciousness of moral defects, and the passage of Romans 13:13-14, all these elements teach us about his desire to reveal his state of mind to Aurelius, in which we realise the anticipation of the confessional narrative of his conversion.

Within a relatively narrow range between 394 and 395, Augustine concentrated on writing the mutually different kinds of commentary on Pauline epistles: *Prepositions from Romans*, *Commentary on Galatians*, *Unfinished Commentary on Romans*. Around the same time, he also put together various types of philosophical, theological, and exegetical questions posed to him by his monastic confreres, and published *Miscellany of Eighty-Three Questions*, in which some questions are concerned about passages from Pauline epistles. It is thus quite strange that, among these exegetical treatises, Romans 13:13 is not selected for comment and that only one reference to Romans 13:14 is found ('Make no provision for the flesh in its appetites' in *Exp. prop. Rm. 77*), from which Augustine chooses only the last few words for exegesis: first he explains the adequacy/acceptability of some preoccupation with material goods, and then remarks on an excessive occupation with it as the nature of concupiscence, thus to be censured. It may be difficult to accept that Augustine mentions this passage very briefly. But if Augustine

were to correlate his use of Romans 13:13-14 with the retrospective aspect of his experiences already found in his earlier writings, what room is there for his reflection in the critical and exegetical commentaries?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Augustine's use of Romans 13:13-14 in his early writings we have considered so far gives a brief insight into the development and progress of his understanding of his past experiences. Already in one of his earliest works there is an allusion to Romans 13:13-14, where Augustine recalls his group's experiences and provides a reflective account of what he and his friend Alypius did together in the pursuit of the exemplary purity of life. Not only does he interpret Romans 13:13-14 as the basis for his attack on the errors of Manichaean moral discourse, in which he was involved for some years, but also, when enlisted into the future vocation as a priest in Hippo, he reads the passage as a divine warning against the state of the African church. It can be seen that, in *Letter 22*, the configuration of both his and his friend's past for a retrospective evaluation is crucial for understanding Romans 13:13-14: his friend's exemplary mode of life, the Christian spirituality he encountered in Italy, and his moral consciousness of moral defects. Augustine takes them as the primary motivation for constituting a decisive statement from which his soul goes forth on its another pilgrimage of vocation. His use of Romans 13:13-14 can be seen, thus, as a prelude to the story that Augustine would show us in *Confessions*.

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