Medical Imagery and the *cura animarum* in the Letters of Augustine

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Introduction

In a growing body of scholarship on the ancient history of medicine, some patristic writers have been regarded as those who constructed the interweaving of the themes of illness and medical care with sin and the care of souls. Some scholars claim that their treatment of these issues made significant contribution to the development of the method of medical analogy and metaphor. Others suggest that this sort of development can be explained from the focus of their interest in the close correlation between medicine, ethics and rhetoric in late antiquity. An interesting point to note is that the North African Christian writers such as Tertullian, Cyprian of Carthage, and Augustine especially draw on the medical imagery. Augustine 'tells his hearers that it was by the Divine Physician's humility that mankind was cured from the deadly tumor of pride' (R. Arbesmann, 'The Concept of "Christus medicus" in St. Augustine', *Traditio* 10 (1954), 1–28 at 9). Augustine urges the congregation to follow the spirit of Christ the *medicus humilis* in his preaching. Do these treatments work in his letters as in his sermons? In this paper, I would like to draw out Augustine's perception of the role of medico-religious conception in his letters. In the process, I shall pay particular attention to the method of medical imagery which was producing these treatments, as well as to the way of dealing with the care of souls.

The physician of the soul and the medicus

By calling attention to the frequent use of medical allusions in the works of Augustine, it is admitted that a simple search on the words *medicus*, *medicamentum*, *medicina* and their cognate words gives almost 1,300 instances in the corpus of Augustine. The great frequency of medical metaphors attracts attention in the

corpus of Augustine, including both his sermons and his letters, though several scholars have made forays into Augustine's use of these *topoi*. As Susan B. Griffith has shown, an interesting observation in his preaching is the 'interweaving of the themes of illness and medicine with sin, humility, and rhetoric: the Word, Christ, heals with a word; Christ's humility heals our pride; preaching of the word can bring healing' ('Medical Imagery in the "New" Sermons of Augustine', *Studia Patristica* 58 (2006), 107–112 at 107). Augustine deals with the complexity of these *topoi*, in particular the connection of healing with the rhetoric of Christ in his sermons. Indeed, the primary usage of his sermons 'occurs in exhortations to humility, to follow the example of Christ the *medicus humilis*' (108). Christ the Physician appears in the sermons as a cure for the evil of pride and as the one who saves the humble: 'It is to such people as that, after all, that the true and truthful physician would have revealed himself, the mediator, the overthrower of pride, the exalter of humility' (Aug. *Serm.* 198.32).

The metaphors relevant to illness and medicine are used over about twenty times in the letters of Augustine. While referring to medical procedures and fostering health, he regards and approaches an account of the pastoral spirituality, legislation and practice. He concerns about the disciplinary, ecclesiastical and doctrinal problems, such as the necessity of the replacement of the sacrifices of the Old testament with new ones (*Ep.* 138.1–3); the harmful errors that has emerged in Spain, as is supposed to be those of Priscillian, and reported to Augustine by Maxima (*Ep.* 264.3); the concern about the spread of Manichaean 'poisons', which have been likened to plague (*Ep.* 79); another metaphor ('the tumor of sacrilegious vanity') used to describe the spread of Donatism in the region of Hippo Regius (*Ep.* 86); Augustine's insistence on the need to 'support the poor, relieve the ill by cures', against Nectarius, a pagan official of Calama in Numidia (*Ep.* 103.3) and; other issues associated with his care for both the unity of pastoral communities and the union between individuals, as well as a monastic life. Augustine also justifies some statements supporting the use of disciplinary measures. He recommends medical treatment and attempts to find effective medicine for all pathologies with the comparison of Christians with patients.

Augustine clearly moves apart people from their vices in his letters, which is defined by him as diseases to be healed. When he wrote a letter to some nuns in the monastery at Hippo, he called back to some harmony them who, in trying to change their superior, had created a state of disorder in the monastery: 'And what I said about making eyes at someone should also be observed with love for the persons and a hatred for their vices in discovering, prohibiting, reporting, proving, and punishing other sins' (*Ep.* 211.11).

It is interesting to note that Augustine is sometimes designated by others as a physician: Consentius, for example, tells him: 'the interior languor of our fevers could not be revealed to you, my physician, unless the role of words were put into writing' (*Ep.* 12*.6). Augustine also follows the tradition of *medicus Christi* (*En. Ps.* 130.7) just as the patristic writers has called themselves *medici animarum*. To take a few examples, Christ is named 'the Great Physician' by Eusebius (*HE* 10.4.12) and Ambrose (*Hel.* 20.75). Christ is also described as 'the Physician of the soul' by Origen (*In Exod.*) and as 'the Physician of the souls and bodies' by Cyril of Jerusalem (*Catech.* 10.13). Likewise, in the letters of Augustine Christ the Physician appears as a cure for the evil of pride and as one who saves the humble: he writes to Fiorentina and reminds her the words of Jesus, referring the Lord himself as the 'wonderful healer of this swelling' (*Ep.* 266.3). Along with the scriptural passage of the body of Christ, he develops the idea of medicine for his congregation, which is Christ himself, and a metaphor of the health of this body. Indeed the doctor not only brings the medicine, but becomes the medicine, offering himself and specifically his humility as the antidote (*Ep.* 140.18). In her pioneering writing Mary Emily Keenan has referred to two allusions to Christ as the Divine Physician in *Letter* 93 (*The Life and Times of St. Augustine as Revealed in His Letters*, Patristic Studies 45 (Washington, DC, 1935), 27). It could be seen as the passages referring rather to *deus medicus* than to *Christus medicus*. In this regard, in fact, it appears to reflect the circumstance in which Augustine has been forced to use coercion against the Rogatist, though relatively small schismatics, and urge Vincent, the addressee and the Rogatist bishop of Cartenna, to come over to the Catholic church: 'he has in this way cured the sick, in this way healed the weak. […] He often adds to the gentle salves by which he comforts us the most biting medicine of

tribulation; he trains even the pious and devout patriarchs with famine. He afflicts the rebellious people with more severe punishments' (*Ep.* 93.3–4).

The form of the Church in his correspondence with Nectarius

From a socio-religious perspective, there exists a possibility to explore his letters, thereby dealing with the disciplinary and spiritual weaknesses as a turning point for his use of the medical imagery. Their harmful and familiar features and ecclesial measures adopted to combat them are reflected in heath metaphors used by Augustine. For instance, in his letter written to Boniface approximately in 417, Augustine analyses the Church's behaviour applying medical metaphors. Also, in his letters written between 406 and 409, he encourages Caecilian, the governor of Africa, to issue some decrees against the Donatists. However, due to time constraints, I would like to focus on the general suggestion concerning the shape of the Church and containing medical metaphors, which can be found in his correspondence with Nectarius, a pagan and city official of Calama in Numidia.

Nectarius asks Augustine to control civil authorities to obtain a decree soothing the punishment imposed on his fellow citizens for on 10 June, disturbing Christians and not respecting the imperial edict (*Ep.* 91.8). That edict prohibited to pay homage to pagan gods. In response to this letter, several months later, Augustine extols the behaviour of the Church, not allowing wrongdoers to remain unpunished (*Ep.* 90). He also refers to the concept of the earthly fatherland evoked by Nectarius, which is on the verge of losing its splendour and vigour due to impunity (*Ep.* 91.2). What is more, Augustine argues that the virtues preached in churches are a clear sign of the fatherland's greatness (*Ep.* 91.3). Therefore, punishment should be inflicted, as it is a means of correction and conversion (*Ep.* 91.6). This statement refers not only to the Church but also to society. Still, Augustine warns against imposing extremely severe punishments (*Ep.* 91.7). He tries to persuade Nectarius that punishment as such is necessary: 'We do not desire to feed our anger by avenging past actions, but we act with mercy in looking out for the future' (*Ep.* 91.9, which is literally quoted by Augustine in *Ep.* 104.5). Christians should punish offenders in various ways, not only gently but also to their benefit and salvation. Augustine also proclaims that wrongdoers should have

their life and bodily integrity and that they should have the means to live. Using a medical metaphor, Augustine argues that depriving malefactors of means to live badly can be compared to cutting off 'something decayed and harmful' (*Ep.* 91.9).

In response to Augustine's letter (*Ep.* 103), Nectarius wrote on 27 March that neither corporal punishment nor financial penalty should be imposed. He refers to the Stoic thesis: 'it is more intolerable to be deprived of one's possessions than to be killed' (*Ep.* 103.3). Thus, Nectarius shows Christian determination in practising the 'nature of your work', that is, *caritas*, 'for in it you support the poor, relieve the sick with cures, and apply medicine to afflicted bodies' (*Ep.* 103.3). By making complimentary remarks on the Christian viewpoint of mercy, he seeks Augustine's support. In his letter to Nectarius written in November, Augustine explains that, in his opinion, offenders should not be punished severely, and he briefly characterises Christian penalties. Malefactors should be deprived only of those material goods that are most precious to them, but Augustine states clearly: 'I did not say that the enemies of the Church, your citizens, ought to be corrected by that degree of want at which they lack what is necessary for nature and to which mercy comes to the aid' (*Ep.* 104.3). Punishment should not give way to a punisher's anger (*Ep.* 104.8) but should be an expression of his genuine care of offenders' future, especially their salvation. Augustine firmly believes that the most critical aspect of punishment is to discourage malefactors from committing sins (*Ep.* 104.5).

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Augustine claims further that Christians do not want heretics to be reduced through punishment. He suggests a middle course between severity, which should not go to this extreme, and impunity, which should not rejoice and celebrate in excessive security, giving other unfortunate people an example to imitate that would lead to the most grave and most hidden punishments (*Ep.* 104.6). As a sanction against an attack on Christian spiritual values, he proposes fear of losing some superfluous goods.

Augustine is also convinced that this kind of punishment is preventive: it is not actual punishment, but rather protection from suffering real punishment, that is, eternal damnation. He adds that it should not be called the punishment for sin, but the safeguard of foresight: its aim is not to impose punishment on pagans but to protect them from receiving eternal punishment (*Ep.* 104.6–7). As has been shown, Augustine often combines medical metaphors with those related to upbringing. In order to reinforce his argumentation, Augustine gives an example of a man who pulls the hair of a boy so that he does not tease snakes. This example may be regarded as a starting point for the formulation of a general rule: 'We are not being kind when we do what we are asked to do, but when we do what does not harm those who ask us' (*Ep.* 104.7). A person who loves wants to protect a beloved person from the danger of sin, as the moral wrongdoing for which punishment is necessarily given entails the suffering of the wrongdoer. Concluding, he once again resorts to one of his favourite medical metaphors: 'For, when physicians see that gangrene must be cut or burned away, they often out of mercy turn a deaf ear to many tears' (*Ep.* 104.7). It is noteworthy that the large majority of medical metaphors used in Augustine's correspondence describe Donatism while he conducts an analysis of the Church's behaviour applying medical metaphors.

Concluding remarks

The letters of Augustine provide us with the confirmation that Augustine is the one who is familiar with the medical phenomena and procedures, and also an ecclesiastical practitioner who cares about the purity of faith, the discipline of his congregation, and their condition and problems of which he describes through a variety of health metaphors. By following the late-antique, biblical and patristic tradition, which he enriches with his positive attitude to the human body, heretics and schismatics, Augustine recommends that heretics and schismatics be treated with determination and patience. The medical imagery in his letters serves not only to illustrate his thought and practice but also, in a considerable way, informs them. His exploration of medical metaphor occasionally has playful elements but always deployed for a much more serious purpose. If the body is thoroughly ill and

sick, the 'physician of souls' ought to allow it to die, just as the judge gives a death sentence to a person whose soul is terminally ill due to sin. In this regard, Augustine appears to be a guide patiently waiting for the spiritual recovery of his congregation, fellow citizens, and schismatics.