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The Relation of Christian Identity to the Spiritual Training in Augustine's *Letters**

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 their belief, observance and practice. After an inspiring approach to the issue of Christian identity,¹ some studies have indicated that the distinction between Christians and pagans may have served as a context-oriented and fluid mechanism in the community of faith.² It is noteworthy that, while the North African evidence allows us to investigate the question of what it meant to be a Christian, there is a comprehensive and integrated 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 with reference to Pierre Hadot's seminal work. Hadot illustrates a complex set of modes of the discipline and defines it as a 'metamorphosis of our personality'.³ Although some scholars have primarily considered it to be purely intellectual training of the intelligence or mind, Hadot emphasises the need to explore its wider diversity and the purgation of the soul within the context of all facets of human thought and behaviour. A modifi-

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¹ Markus 1990.

² Kahlos 2007; Rebillard 2012a; Rebillard and Rüpke 2015; Rüpke and Spickermann 2012.

³ Hadot 1995, 82 and 127. See also Chase, Clark, and McGhee 2013.

cation of the spiritual training in question appeared in late antiquity. In the North African Church, though sporadically and non-thematically, Tertullian and Cyprian referred to the significance and limits of the spiritual discipline and, from the mid-fourth century, Christian writers began to look into the matter in more detail than before.⁴ A crucial stage of the development seems to have been prepared by Augustine. Some surveys have described the discipline as being linked with the context of his concern for Christian identity in the faith community. However, the correlation remains in question.⁵ In this paper, therefore, I shall first examine how he referred to the Christian code of behaviour in his letters.⁶ In particular, I will focus my attention on epistolary correspondence of Augustine with two seemingly ‘pagans’, I shall show how Augustine tried to impose his idea of Christian norms of behaviour on his correspondents. Then I shall ask what Augustine understood by the concept of spiritual training. For the sake of clarity, I have divided the letters into three groups along thematic lines, and in each group, I will consider them chronologically as far as possible.⁷ Finally, I shall consider the principal feature of spiritual training, thereby coming to some understanding of the horizons within which he made use of the dimension in speaking about the nourishment of Christian identity that he hoped for in the community of faith of the North African church.

CHRISTIANS AND THE PLURALITY OF THEIR IDENTITIES

Letter Exchange with Dioscorus

The first group to be considered is *Letters* 117 and 118, the correspondence between Augustine and Dioscorus. The latter was a young native of Greece

⁴ Burns and Jensen 2014, 519–52 and 553–599.

⁵ For the secondary literature on the spiritual training in the works of Augustine, see Agaësse 1991; Ayres 1998; Madec 1996–2002; Claes 2007; Claes 2016; Kamimura 2005; Kamimura 2014; Kolbet 2010; Leclercq 1961; Madec 1996–2002; Napier 2013; Otten 2009; Pavie 2012; Pollmann 2005; Stock 2010; Stock 2011.

⁶ For Augustine’s epistolary practices and its correlation with his view of the Christian code of behaviour, see Doyle 2002; Ebbeler 2012. For a selected bibliography on Augustine’s letters, see Divjak 1996–2002, 1046–1037. Another comprehensive and critical information regarding the correspondence of Augustine is provided by a searchable database: *Scrinium Augustini: The World of Augustine’s Letters* (Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, Poland) <<http://www.scrinium.umk.pl>>, accessed 20 December 2015.

⁷ With regard to the chronological survey of Augustine’s letters, see Klaus-D. Daur, ed., *CCSL* 31, 2004; 31A, 2005; 31B, 2009; Divjak 1996–2002, 1027–1036; Eno 1999, 299–305; Lancel 2011a, 159–175; Perler and Maier 1969; Teske, trans., *WSA* 2/1–4, 2001–2005.

whose prosopographical information is mostly provided by these letters.⁸ It is more than likely that they opened up communication by letter in the autumn of 410.⁹ Before departing Carthage, where he was studying, Dioscorus wrote to Augustine, asking questions about the philosophical works of Cicero, in particular his *De natura deorum* and 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. In 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, he first studied at Rome and was most likely the brother of Zenobius, a friend of Augustine and to whom he dedicated one of the Cassiciacum dialogues, that is, *De ordine*. What else can these letters tell us?

It is interesting to note that Possidius, Augustine's friend and biographer, classified this letter exchange into the group designated 'Against Pagans' in his *Indiculum* of Augustine's works, appended to the *Life of Augustine*.¹⁰ Because of the main part of *Letter* 118 and Dioscorus' deep concern for pagan philosophy, some scholars have been inclined to consider him a pagan.¹¹ By this line of thinking, the communication between Augustine and Dioscorus developed on the basis of their rational behaviour, in particular of Augustine's politeness and courtesy. His response is interpreted as an affirmation of Dioscorus' paganism and Augustine's respect for the Graeco-Roman classical culture. This seems to be the case with the other pagan correspondents, for instance, Longinianus (*Epp.* 233–235),¹² Volusianus (*Ep.* 132),¹³ and Maximus (*Ep.* 17).¹⁴ However, with regard to the religious affiliation of Dioscorus, Augustine explicitly mentions that Dioscorus shows a decided preference for 'Christian teaching' over all others: 'you are confident that it [*scil.* Christian teaching] alone contains the hope of

⁸ On Dioscorus, see *PCBE* 1, s.v. Dioscorus 2, 279–280; *PLRE* 2, s.v. Dioscorus 2, 367; Morgenstern 1993, 79–80; Wankenne 1974; Wankenne 1996–2002. On *Ep.* 118, see also Fiedrowicz 1997.

⁹ *Ep.* 117: Daur: 410, Divjak: 410, Lancel: hiver 410–411, Perler: septembre 410, Teske: the beginning of 410; *Ep.* 118: Daur: 410, Divjak: 410, Eno: late 410/early 411, Lancel: hiver 410–411, Perler: fin automne-hiver 410–411, Teske: in late 410 or early 411.

¹⁰ Possidius, *Indiculum*; Wilmart, ed., 163.

¹¹ See Morgenstern 1993, 79 and 227; Wankenne 1996–2002, 455–456.

¹² On Longinianus, *PLRE* 2, 686–687; Kahlos 2007, 81–83; Mastandrea 2004–2010; Morgenstern 1993, 126.

¹³ On Volusianus, see note 22 below.

¹⁴ On Maximus, see *PCBE* 1, s.v. Maximus 3, 733–734; *PLRE* 1, s.v. Maximus 28, 585; Morgenstern 1993, 122–123; Lancel 2011b.

eternal salvation'.¹⁵ In fact, he is quite anxious for Dioscorus to seek another way of finding the truth: he warns against deviation from the way that 'he [*scil.* Christ] constructed who, as God, saw the weakness of our steps'.¹⁶ Although it is not certain whether they met in Carthage or somewhere nearby, the various activities of Dioscorus were familiar to Augustine, and the fact that he was not a pagan is among these.

This letter provides a detailed compendium of Augustine's views on contemporary pagan philosophy. It discusses the teachings of the Stoics, Academics, Epicureans, and Platonists.¹⁷ Augustine dedicates over thirty long paragraphs to answering the questions posed by the youth, despite his highly critical attitude towards 'those old, worn-out errors of many people [*scil.* philosophers]'.¹⁸ It might be suggested that Augustine feels real sympathy for this young ambitious dilettante because of the similarity of Dioscorus current status to that of Augustine's past. He does not show any reluctance to talk about his old self, who once instructed boys in rhetoric. However, he explicitly criticises Dioscorus' willingness to shift Augustine back to his past as a professor of rhetoric while forgetting his present position as a bishop.

[I]t is not evident to me that there is nothing improper involved in this matter [*scil.* 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.¹⁹

[T]he 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.²⁰

In chiding his literary correspondent's eagerness for intellectual pursuits once shared by himself, he would rather criticise Dioscorus for placing a higher priority on the previous identity of Augustine.²¹ Thus, although, in the lengthy

¹⁵ *Ep.* 118.11; CCSL 31B, 120: *christianam doctrinam [...] in ea sola esse praesumere spem salutis aeternae*. For the English translation of Augustine's letters, see Teske, trans. WSA 2/1–4.

¹⁶ *Ep.* 118.22; CCSL 31B, 127: *illo, qui gressuum nostrorum tamquam deus uidit infirmitatem*.

¹⁷ For Augustine's views on contemporary philosophy and rhetoric, see Bochet 1998.

¹⁸ *Ep.* 118.7; CCSL 31B, 117: *multorum amosas et decrepitas falsitates*.

¹⁹ *Ep.* 118.2; CCSL 31B, 113: *in hac re nihil esse dedecoris, non mihi uidetur. Non enim dedecora facies rerum attingit sensum meum, cum cogito episcopum ecclesiasticis curis circumstrepentibus districtum atque distentum repente quasi obsurdescentem cohibere se ab his omnibus et dialogorum Tullianorum quaestiuiculas uni scholastico exponere?*

²⁰ *Ep.* 118.9; CCSL 31B, 118: *ubi has curas tuas deponeres, christianorum tibi basilica Hipponensis occurrit, quia in ea nunc sedet episcopus, qui aliquando ista pueris uendidit*.

²¹ McCann 2010; Ebbeler 2010, 192 and n. 5.

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 identities and commitments: Dioscorus is fully expected to reconsider the arrangement of these based on his religious affiliation.

Letter Exchange with Volusianus

The second group to be examined is *Letters* 132, 135, and 137, the letter exchange between Augustine and Volusianus. The life and activities of the latter, and of his family members, are known to us through several documents (including *Vita Melaniae Iunioris*, in which the story of his baptism on his deathbed is told).²² In the years 411 and 412, when he was residing in Carthage, Volusianus received a letter from Augustine (*Ep.* 132).²³ Volusianus replied with a series of questions, partly because of Augustine's prompt to write back and partly because of pressure and advice from his Christian mother (*Ep.* 132). Volusianus seemed reluctant both to enter into correspondence with Augustine and to give positive attention to questions about Christian faith, seeing from the pagan perspective (*Ep.* 135). However, Flavius Marcellinus, a tribune and notary who was sent to Africa on a special mission from the imperial court at Ravenna, was committed to serving as a reliable liaison between the literary-minded young aristocrat and his Christian friend.²⁴ This is not only because Marcellinus was involved in 'a daily discussion with the same man [*scil.* Volusianus] [...] driven by the entreaty of his holy mother'²⁵ but also because he was concerned about a predicament of Augustine's. A rich landowner from Hippo had been bitterly disappointed with the bishop's inability to provide appropriate answers to the questions whether the Church was dangerous to the Roman state.²⁶ Indeed, it was Marcellinus

²² On Volusianus, see *PCBE* 2, s.v. Volusianus 1, 2340–2341; *PLRE* 2, s.v. Volusianus 6, 1184–1185; Morgenstern 1993, 125. For the exchanges between the bishop of Hippo and the distinguished Roman, see Chastagnol 1956, 241–53; Divjak 1996–2002, 945–946 and 974–975; Jones 2014, 82–83 and 93; Lancel 2002, 314–318. For *Vita Melaniae Iunioris* and the story of Volusianus' baptism, see Brown 1961; Gorce 1962; and Coon 1997, 113–115.

²³ *Ep.* 132: Daur: 411/412, Divjak: 411/412, Eno: 411/412, Lancel: automne 411, Teske: 411 or 412.

²⁴ On Marcellinus, see *PCBE* 2, s.v. Flavius Marcellinus 2, 671–688; *PLRE* 2, s.v. Fl. Marcellinus 10, 711–712; Drecoll 2004–2010; Morgenstern 1993, 112–114. For the role of Marcellinus played in Augustine's literary and other activities, see Ebbeler 2012, 191–192; McLynn 1999; Moreau 1973.

²⁵ *Ep.* 136.1: CCSL 31B, 253; *Est enim [...] cum eodem cottidiana [...] disputatio, sanctae si quidem matris eius precatione compulsus.*

²⁶ *Ep.* 136.3: CCSL 31B, 255. In response to the objections raised by pagans and Roman aristocrats, Augustine engaged in the writings of *City of God* within a year. See O'Daly 1999, 32–33.

whom Augustine ‘needed [...] as a spokesman in the salons of Carthage’.²⁷ Thus, soon after receiving the letter from Marcellinus with further questions posted by Volusianus (*Ep.* 136), Augustine sent a reply to Volusianus (*Ep.* 137) and responded to the questions mentioned in the previous letters.

Augustine begins their communication by encouraging Volusianus to read the scriptures, in particular ‘the letters of the apostles’.²⁸ He prompts Volusianus to write back with questions arising from this reading. It is noteworthy that Augustine would choose to undertake such correspondence instead of meeting Volusianus in person. This may be partly due to difficulty in setting up a meeting schedule. Yet another reason is perhaps more important. Augustine is willing to distance their communication 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.’²⁹ In comparison with the genuineness of the scriptures, he once again criticises ‘the false beauty of rhetoric’ for enticing ‘by obscure language’³⁰ those who are longing for the truth. Augustine proposes, therefore, to exclude from the dialogue both Volusianus’ interest in rhetoric and a potential reader of their communication, both of which he assumed to be obstacle to focusing on spiritual matters.

Volusianus replied 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 and principal concern is to report the recent gatherings of a circle of friends in Carthage and to share the achievement of their discussions. He informs Augustine about the ‘various talents and interests’ of the discussants.³¹ These learned friends are pagans and Roman aristocrats with whom Volusianus has interests in common. They 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 mention Augustine’s education and former career as a professor of rhetoric—‘I speak to someone who knows about that. For you also taught this a little before. [...] with which [*scil.* philosophy] you are familiar and which you yourself are accustomed to cultivate [...]’³²—but at the end of the letter,

²⁷ McLynn 1999, 42.

²⁸ *Ep.* 132; CCSL 31B, 240: *apostolorum linguas*.

²⁹ *Ep.* 132; CCSL 31B, 240: *eorum irruentem praesentiam, qui plerumque non sunt apti tali negotio magisque linguae certaminibus quam scientiae lumimbus delectantur*.

³⁰ *Ep.* 132; CCSL 31B, 240: *fuscatis eloquiis [...] linguae tectorio*.

³¹ *Ep.* 135.1; CCSL 31B, 249: *ingeniis studisque sententiae*.

³² *Ep.* 135.1; CCSL 31B, 249–250: *Apud agnoscentem loquor; etiam ista paulo ante docuisti. [...] ad*

with an apparently polite and sympathetic attitude towards Augustine's position, Volusianus urges him 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 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.'³³

According to his report on the cordial meeting, one of the participants interrupted the 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.'³⁴

It is noticeable that Volusianus tells Augustine about questions raised by a friend of the circle rather than offering questions of his own. He attempts neither to pose questions about the scriptural reading nor to communicate with Augustine about his own uncertainty as to the incarnation and the miracles that Christ performed. Despite the fact that Marcellinus writes to Augustine to make known Volusianus' questions about these issues, which have 'been examined again and again' by Volusianus and his fellows in Carthage,³⁵ Volusianus intends to deflect the attention of the bishop away from the teachings of Christianity. It is difficult to determine whether Volusianus was a pagan when he received the letter from Augustine.³⁶ But, it is certain that, despite Augustine's concern for the spiritual health of the young aristocrat, Volusianus invited him into his circle of erudite friends. Volusianus explicitly preferred his own intellectual interest shared with

familiarem tuam [...] quam ipse [...] fouere consueueras.

³³ Ep. 135.2; CCSL 31B, 251: *Interest famae tuae, ut quaesita nouerimus. Vitiumque absque detrimento cultus diuini in aliis sacerdotibus toleratur inscitia, at cum ad antistitem Augustinum uenitur, legi deest, quicquid contigerit ignorari.*

³⁴ Ep. 135.2; CCSL 31B, 250–251: *'et quis', inquit, 'est sapientia ad perfectum christianitatis imbutus, qui ambigua, in quibus haereo, possit aperire dubiosque assensus meos uera uel uerisimili credulitate firmare?' [...] 'Miror, utrum mundi dominus et rector intemeratae feminae corpus impleuerit, pertulerit decem mensium longa illa fastidia mater et tamen uirgo enixa sit solemnitate pariendi et post haec uirginitas putatur intacta'.*

³⁵ Ep. 136.1; CCSL 31B, 253: *usquequaque detrita est.*

³⁶ See Cameron 2011, 196; Rebillard 2011, 81–82.

others to religious affiliation, the latter of which was not high on the list of priorities.

These letters that I have considered so far give a clear picture of Augustine's experience with less committed Christians whose religious identity resulted in no conflict with their social and intellectual engagement: they 'activate different allegiances, depending on the different contexts of interaction'.³⁷ They would communicate with Augustine using their knowledge about Augustine's former career as a professor of rhetoric. Although Augustine continually focused on how to integrate Christian living into everyday life, Dioscorus and Volusianus seemed uninterested in remaining conscious of the incongruity between these codes of behaviour and thought. As a bishop who was confronted with an intellectual traditionalist, Augustine would urge his correspondent to pay attention to the exclusive privilege granted to the Christian way of life. But how did he suggest disciplining oneself to conform to it?

SPIRITUAL TRAINING IN THE LETTERS OF AUGUSTINE

The intellectual and therapeutic aspect of spiritual training

The first letter to be considered is *Letter 26*, which dates from 394 or 395³⁸ and is addressed to Licentius,³⁹ the son of Augustine's wealthy patron, Romanianus. Attached to the letter, Licentius had sent Augustine a lengthy poem (*Carmen*), which blended Roman mythology with Christian scriptures, exhibiting a compendium of the mathematical disciplines and an upwards journey—an ascent towards light.⁴⁰ While pointing to his reasons for feeling anxiety about his former student's circumstances, Augustine's reply indicates a path to God distinct from the apparently Varronian (Varro of Reate) path in Licentius' poem. Augustine speaks of the temporal stage of progress towards eternal embrace, which wisdom has first prepared for us and 'tamed by certain laborious exercises'.⁴¹ When he sets out what stimulates him in the poem, the allusion to the difficulty of Licentius' way of life can be seen as the urge to concentrate the attention of Licentius on the mind, thereby compelling him to cling to Christ: 'Christ

³⁷ Rebillard 2012b, 52.

³⁸ *Ep.* 26: Daur: 394, Divjak: 394, Eno: 395, Lancel: été-automne 395, Perler: 395 mi-avril/mi-mai, Teske: 394 or 395.

³⁹ On Licentius, see *PLRE* 2, 682; *PCBE* 1, s.v. 'Licentius', 640–642; Morgenstern 1993, 11–12 and 42. See also Lancel 2011c.

⁴⁰ For an edition of this enigmatic poem and its commentary, see Shanzer 1991; Cutino 2000.

⁴¹ *Ep.* 26 (1) 2; *CCSL* 31, 76: *exercitatoris quibusdam laboribus edomuerit*.

is the truth.⁴² This emphasis on the thoroughgoing internal reflection, which also evokes the experience of Licentius, Augustine, and their friends at a villa of Cassiciacum, is taken very seriously by Augustine.⁴³ It is one of the essential elements of his views which followed ancient traditions of the spiritual training: the traditions comprised 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 the years 397 to 428, thus covering almost all of Augustine's episcopal period. The first of these, *Letter* 37, dating from approximately 397,⁴⁴ 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*.⁴⁵ In this short letter, Augustine not only expressed pleasure that his writings had 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, Augustine clearly acknowledges that Simplician would expect him to be exercised in such a way as to consider the problems, the answers to which come to be his first literary work as a bishop of Hippo, while conforming to the various scriptural passages under investigation.

Letter 56, written perhaps around 402 and addressed to Celer,⁴⁶ a 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'.⁴⁷ With regard to his idea about spiritual progress of the mind, it is interesting to note that Augustine here mentions that it is a more difficult task as 'to break the chain of sinfulness, which has become habitual and like a friend',⁴⁸ that is, the view of a spiritual exercise as bringing together its intellectual aspect with its therapeutic one, depending on the comparison between temporal and eternal life promised us 'through Christ

⁴² *Ep.* 26 (3) 3; CCSL 31, 86: *Christus est ueritas*.

⁴³ For the narrative function of Licentius in the Cassiciacum dialogues, see Conybeare 2005.

⁴⁴ *Ep.* 37: Daur: 397, Divjak: 397, Eno: 397, Lancel: 396–397, Perler: 396 spring, Teske: c. 397.

⁴⁵ Perler and Meier 1969, 165–166; Morgenstern 1993, 43.

⁴⁶ *Ep.* 56: Daur: 402(?), Divjak: 402?, Eno: 396–410, Lancel: sans doute en 402, Perler: 402, Teske: perhaps around 400. On Celer, see *PCBE* 1, s.v. Celer 1, 202–203; *PLRE* 2, s.v. Celer 2, 275; Morgenstern 1993, 43. See also Lancel 2002, 276.

⁴⁷ *Ep.* 56.1; CCSL 31A, 3: *salubribusque studiis in rerum diuinarum atque humanarum cognitione oblectari atque exerceri uelim*.

⁴⁸ *Ep.* 56.2; CCSL 31A, 4: *Sed ad sectandam insolitam rectitudinem, usitatae et quasi familiaris peruersitatis uinculum abrumpere*.

and in Christ'.⁴⁹

Letter 102, written around 409,⁵⁰ is addressed to Augustine's fellow-priest, Deogratias of Carthage.⁵¹ It is 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,⁵² at the end of this letter, Augustine stresses the importance of those questions concerning divine scriptures from the viewpoint of exercises of the 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.'⁵³

Letter 162, a part of the exchange between Augustine and his friend Evodius,⁵⁴ the bishop of Uzalis, was written in 414 or 415.⁵⁵ At the beginning of this letter, as a preliminary to replying to the questions Evodius had asked him in the previous letters (*Epp.* 159, 160, and 161), Augustine confirms that even those 'who are endowed with a mind that is less sharp and less well trained [...] are carried along by a desire to know our writings'.⁵⁶ They are eager for understanding what he writes about complicated problems. These problems are referred to later in this letter and include the correlation between body and soul, Christ's conception and birth, and so on. Since Augustine reflects on circumstances of the future readers of his writings, he realises 'how much care in writing one who ponders these questions ought to have'.⁵⁷

Letter 193, written at the end of 418, is addressed to Marius Mercator,⁵⁸ who was Catholic layman and the author of two treatises (not extant) against

⁴⁹ *Ep.* 56.2; CCSL 31A, 3; *per Christum atque in Christo*.

⁵⁰ *Ep.* 102: Daur: 409, Divjak: 409, Eno: near 409, Lancel: entre 405 et 411, Perler: vers 409, Teske: between 406 and 412.

⁵¹ PCBE 1, s.v. Deogratias 1, 271–273; Morgenstern 1993, 57.

⁵² *Ep.* 102.8: CCSL 31B, 13; *Ep.* 102.28: CCSL 31B, 26; *Ep.* 102.30: CCSL 31B, 27–28. For Porphyry's idea in this letter, see Bochet 2011; Magny 2013.

⁵³ *Ep.* 102.38; CCSL 31B, 33: *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*.

⁵⁴ PCBE 1, s.v. Euodius 1, 366–373; Morgenstern 1993, 26. See also Hübner 1996–2002.

⁵⁵ *Ep.* 162: Divjak: 414/415, Eno: 414/415, Lancel: en 414/415, Teske: 414 or 415.

⁵⁶ *Ep.* 162.1; CSEL 44, 511: *qui minus acuto minusque exercitato ingenio praediti eo tamen studio feruntur ad cognoscendas litteras nostras*.

⁵⁷ *Ep.* 162.1; CSEL 44, 512: *quanta cura in scribendo esse debeat*.

⁵⁸ *Ep.* 193: Divjak: 418, Lancel: fin 418, Perler: 418 fin octobre, Teske: c. 418. On Marius Mercator, see Morales and Dodaro, 2004–2010; Morgenstern 1993, 90.

Pelagianism. This letter contains the pedagogical aspect of spiritual training and its correlation with the audience for the writings of Augustine and more erudite writers (*dictiores*).⁵⁹

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.⁶⁰

As already mentioned in the case of *Letter* 102, Augustine first draws the attention of the reader to the relevant issues and, in comparison with these problems, emphasises the importance of the scriptures from the intellectual aspect of spiritual training.

The next reference to these exercises, in *Letter* 202A from at the beginning of 420, is written to Optatus of Milevis⁶¹ in a similar context of pedagogical care for those who rashly and thoughtlessly provide an answer to a problem of which they are not sufficiently knowledgeable. Although he himself still has not determined how the soul derived original sin from Adam, Augustine clearly offers the proper place to stop their investigation: the point at which 'they either find what they want or exercise the keenness of their mind by investigation'.⁶² With regard to such a crucial problem, therefore, the investigator seems to be invited exclusively to the exercise of his/her mind through intensive enquiry.

Letter 2*, one of the so-called Divjak Letters (which Johannes Divjak discovered in 1981), was written probably in 428,⁶³ making it chronologically the latest of the Divjak Letters. It was addressed to Firmus,⁶⁴ a cultivated nobleman of Carthage, who had previously written to Augustine, sending a sample of his young son's declamation. After exhorting Firmus, in the body of this letter (§ 3–11), to receive baptism, Augustine addresses the question of Firmus' unnamed man.⁶⁵ The natural talent, fine liberal education, and skilled in rhetoric of the unnamed young man are, in Augustine's opinion, highly commendable. Notably,

⁵⁹ *Ep.* 193.4.10; CSEL 57, 173.

⁶⁰ *Ep.* 193.4.10; CSEL 57, 173: *neque enim debemus indociles esse doctores et certe melius homo corrigitur paruis, quam frangitur durus, cum his, quae scripsimus, ita nostra uel aliorum exerceatur et erudiatur infirmitas, ut tamen in eis nulla uelut canonica constituatur auctoritas.*

⁶¹ On Optatus of Milevis, see *PCBE* 1, s.v. Optatus 7, 803–805; Morgenstern 1993, 45–47.

⁶² *Ep.* 202A.2.6; CSEL 57, 305: *donec aut id, quod uolunt, reperiant, aut ipsa inquisitione aciem mentis exercent.*

⁶³ *Ep.* 2*: Divjak: 427/428, Eno: probably 428, Lancel: en 426/427, Teske: probably 428.

⁶⁴ *PCBE* 1, s.v. Firmus 4, 460; Morgenstern 1993, 77. For this letter, see Braun 1987.

⁶⁵ Brown 2000, 471–473; Chadwick 1983.

however, Augustine expresses hope that the young man will devote himself not only to eloquence (which Cicero regards as useless without wisdom),⁶⁶ but to the nourishment for a wholesome character. Although Augustine may be reminded of the benefit of the rhetorical exercises in his youth, he cannot leave behind the path on which life should be led. Therefore, he provides the young man with same advice on the rectification of the mind as he gave to his fellow Licentius, as mentioned above, in *Letter* 26.

The religious and eschatological aspect of spiritual training

Next group of letters, which were seemingly composed between 408 and 415 and pertain to Augustine's thoughts on religious dimension of these exercises, contains *Letters* 92, 130, 131, 137, and 157. *Letter* 92, dating from 408 or 409,⁶⁷ was written to Itatica,⁶⁸ a wealthy noblewoman who had recently lost her husband. She had asked him if God could be seen with bodily eyes. With regard to this problem, which he had turned to again and again to try to resolve,⁶⁹ in the case of this letter, he plainly touches on the absurdity of the idea that God has a body. He says that the vision of God is promised to us as a reward of faith. Certainly, it is not striking that he speaks of the exercises of the saints' mind trained purposefully for attaining divine visions.

Letter 130, dating probably from 411 or 412,⁷⁰ was addressed to a wealthy Roman widow, Anicia Proba Faltonia,⁷¹ who had fled to North Africa when the Goths attacked Rome. The bishop of Hippo then, answering her question on prayer to God, refers to exercising the mind by taking up the scriptural texts. He suggested her to read three passages: 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 need, this is not enough:

⁶⁶ *Ep.* 2*.12; BA 46B, 90: *eloquentiam cum sapientia plurimum prodesse ciuitatibus, eloquentiam uero sine sapientia nimum obesse plerumque, prodesse nunquam*. See Cicero, *De inuentione* 1.1 and Aug. *De doctrina christiana* 4.5.7.

⁶⁷ *Ep.* 92: Daur: 408/409, Divjak: 408/409, Eno: 408, Lancel: 408/409, Perler: 408/409, Teske: sometime prior to 408.

⁶⁸ On Itatica, see *PLRE* 2, 465–466; Lancel 2002, 238–239; Morgenstern 1993, 89.

⁶⁹ *Ep.* 147 addressed to Paulina around in 413; *Retractationes* 2.41.

⁷⁰ *Ep.* 130: Daur: 411/412, Divjak: 411/412, Eno: after 411, Lancel: entre 411 et 413, Teske: not much later than 411.

⁷¹ *PCBE* 1, 921; *PLRE* 2, 732–733; Lancel 2002, 393; Morgenstern 1993, 80. See also White 1992, 205–206.

God requires 'our desire, by which we can receive what he prepares to give, to be exercised in prayers'.⁷² This leads Augustine to quote 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 God's 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)'.⁷³ 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 supposes that we who do not know what benefit the vexations and troubles in this life provide.⁷⁴ The belief in the magnificence of the reward occurs in the context of the exhortation to prayer. Here, too, we find the statement that the affections, that is 'the swelling of pride' and 'patience', should be tested and exercised through prayer in order to receive the greatness of the reward.

The next letter in the group under consideration, *Letter 131*, which was written to the same widow between 411 and 413,⁷⁵ contains the similar passage from Romans 8:28. In agreement with her comment that the corruptibility of the temporal body (*corpus corruptibile*) is the burden of the soul,⁷⁶ 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 exercising our patience for 'the hope of the world to come'.

Letter 137, written in 411 or 412 and addressed to the layman Volusianus,⁷⁷ deals with the question of Christ's divine and human nature. In the main part of this letter (§ 2–18),⁷⁸ 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

⁷² *Ep.* 130.17; CCSL 31B, 225: *qui nouit, quid nobis necessarium sit, priusquam petamus ab eo, [...] exerceri in orationibus desiderium nostrum, quo possimus capere, quod praeparat dare.*

⁷³ *Ep.* 130.17; CCSL 31B, 225: *Tanto quippe illud, quod ualde magnum est, quod nec oculus uidit, quia non est color, nec auris audiuit, quia non est sonus, nec in cor hominis ascendit.*

⁷⁴ For Augustine's interpretation of Romans 8:26 in this letter, La Bonnardière 1986a.

⁷⁵ *Ep.* 131: Daur: 411/412, Divjak: 411/412, Eno: 412/413, Lancel: 411/413, Teske: 412 or 413.

⁷⁶ Van Fleteren 1993.

⁷⁷ *Ep.* 137: Daur: 411/412, Divjak: 411/412, Eno: 411/412, Lancel: printemps 412, Teske: 411 or 412. On Volusianus, see note 22 above.

⁷⁸ O'Daly 1999, 33.

to the description of the history of Christian religion, in which he suggests that persecution and heresies have aided the touchstone of its teaching: 'In alternating times of adversity and of prosperity they vigilantly practice patience and temperance.'⁷⁹ He not only suggests the necessity of these exercises for the life to come but also situates the practice of these exercises in the salvific functions of the Church, imperfect and uncertain though they may be, as a foreshadowing of the true reward to come.

Letter 157, written in 414 or 415 and addressed to Hilary, a Catholic layman from Syracuse in Sicily,⁸⁰ deals with a series of questions about some Pelagian teachings which Hilary had asked Augustine.⁸¹ Part of his answer is that, concerning the baptism of infants, the Pelagians must not impede the salvation through the grace of Christ. Once again, the focus is on the exercise of the faith.⁸² 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.

The exegetical aspect of spiritual training

We come now to consider *Letters 28, 137, 149, and 199*, composed from 394 to probably 420 and, thus, occurring sporadically during his episcopal period. The first of these, *Letter 28* (dating in 394 or 395),⁸³ is addressed to Jerome, who received it only many years later, after it had circulated in Rome and elsewhere.⁸⁴ 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'.⁸⁵ Accordingly, in *Letter 72* (dated to 403), Jerome has high praise for the exegete Augustine for diligently and successfully engaging in the study of scriptures.⁸⁶

Next is *Letter 137*, addressed, as mentioned above, to the layman Volusianus.

⁷⁹ *Ep.* 137.16; CCSL 31B, 271: *Alternis aduersitatibus et prosperitatibus rerum patientiam et temperantiam uigilanter exercent.*

⁸⁰ *Ep.* 157; Divjak: 414/415, Eno: 414/early 415, Lancel: 414, Teske: 414 or 415.

⁸¹ Morgenstern 1993, 93; De Plinval 1966.

⁸² *Ep.* 157.3.19; CSEL 44, 468.

⁸³ *Ep.* 28: Daur: 394/395, Divjak: 394/395, Eno: 394/395, Lancel: printemps 395, Perler: 395 printemps, Teske: between 394 and 395.

⁸⁴ Morgenstern 1993, 70–71; Teske, trans. WSA 2/1, 90. See also White 1990.

⁸⁵ *Ep.* 28.1; CCSL 31B, 92: *exercitatio liberalis.*

⁸⁶ *Ep.* 72.3; CCSL 31A, 41 (= Jerome *Ep.* 105.2.3; CSEL 55, 244).

It was written in response to christological questions in 411 or 412.⁸⁷ After discussing the issue of the growth of the Christian religion, in the end of this letter, Augustine turns to Christ's twofold commandment of love of God and of neighbour, in which all of the wisdom of philosophy is embodied. He refers then to the simplicity of the scriptural language in contrast with the hidden truth in the scriptures: 'And it [*scil.* 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.'⁸⁸ This is the place for both the unlearned and the learned to practice their exercises by approaching the 'lowly language' of the scriptures.

The next two letters, *Letters* 149 and 199, deal with obscure passages in the scriptures. First, *Letter* 149, among the correspondence between Augustine and Paulinus of Nola, was written in 416 as a reply to *Letter* 121, written by Paulinus, in approximately 413.⁸⁹ 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 Gospels of Luke, Mark and John (§ 31–33). He closes the letter by explaining the significance of those interpretations connected with the spiritual training of 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.⁹⁰

Similar references to the meaning of scriptural interpretations are found in *Letter* 199, written to Hesychius, bishop of Salona in Dalmatia, who had asked Augustine about the end of the world: in the letter, Augustine refers to *City of*

⁸⁷ *Ep.* 137: Daur: 411/412, Divjak: 411/412, Eno: 411/412, Lancel: printemps 412, Teske: 411 or 412.

⁸⁸ *Ep.* 137.5.18; CCSL 31B, 272–3: *sed inuitat omnes humili sermone, quos non solum manifesta pascit, sed etiam secreta exerceat ueritate hoc in promptis quod in reconditis habens. [...] His salubriter et praua corriguntur et parua nutriuntur et magna oblectantur ingenia.*

⁸⁹ *Ep.* 149: Divjak: 414–416, Eno: late 415, Lancel: entre 414 et 416, Perler: 415 fin de l'année, Teske: toward the end of 416. See *PLRE* 2, 681–683; Morgenstern 1993, 40–42.

⁹⁰ *Ep.* 149.3.34; CSEL 44, 379: *cum enim interrogando disputas, et quaeris acriter et doces humiliter. utile est autem, ut de obscuritatibus diuinarum scripturarum, quas exercitationis nostrae causa deus esse uoluit, multae inueniantur sententiae, cum aliud alii uideatur, quae tamen omnes sanae fidei doctrinaeque concordent.*

God 20.5.4, the latter of which dated to 418–420.⁹¹ In this long letter, which is 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.⁹² Then, he warns him 'not to be content with their [scriptural] surface meaning';⁹³ 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'.⁹⁴

Letter 213, prepared by Augustine as the record of the ecclesiastical proceedings, is not included in the category of 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 his successor in the bishopric.⁹⁵ 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 is a remarkable testimony, not only because the ecclesiastical secretaries were faithfully and attentively noting these *Acta Ecclesiastica* but also because it expresses Augustine's own hope, to which he would commit himself for 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.'⁹⁶ Augustine denies that he is retiring from all administrative duties in the church and that new bishop should do them alone. But, he asks his congregation's permission to turn his mind to his own matter: 'Let no one, then, begrudge me my leisure, because my leisure will involve important work.'⁹⁷

CONCLUSION

The letters of Augustine considered in this paper portray his sustained effort, over more or less over his episcopal period, to impress upon his correspondents

⁹¹ *Ep.* 199: Divjak: 418/420, Eno: uncertain, Lancel: entre 418 et 420, Teske: 419/420. On Hesychius, see Lancel 2002, 370 and 409; Morgenstern 1993, 48. See also La Bonnardière 1986b.

⁹² *Ep.* 199.9.26; CSEL 57, 266.

⁹³ *Ep.* 199.11.42; CSEL 57, 280: *nec earum superficie debemus esse contenti*.

⁹⁴ *Ep.* 199.11.45; CSEL 57, 284: *nostras intelligentias deo placuit exercere*.

⁹⁵ Brown 2000, 411–412; Lancel 2002, 457–458.

⁹⁶ *Ep.* 213.6; CSEL 57, 378: *et ego tandem aliquando, si quantulumcumque spatium mihi donauerit deus, ipsamque meam quantulumcumque uitam non dem segnitiae nec donem inertiae, sed in sanctis scripturis, quantum ipse permittit et largitur, exerceam*.

⁹⁷ *Ep.* 213.6; CSEL 57, 378: *nemo ergo inuideat otio meo, quia meum otium magnum habet negotium*.

the significance of spiritual training. However much one might naturally expect Augustine's view of the exercises to evolve from the first half of the 390s until 428 (shortly before his death in 430), the evidence in multiple aspects of these exercises suggests that he avoided development and change in his thought. Although he repeatedly turned to the necessity of spiritual discipline as a means for persuading his readers through the epistolary conversation, 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 to return to spiritual matters had only limited significance for him and his correspondents. 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' 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.'⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹ It is important to note that, because of his repeated claims in epistolary exchange to be open and circulated publicly (probably in small groups),¹⁰⁰ Augustine's letters could serve as spiritual and pastoral resources in Hippo and other African communities. Also, despite his determined efforts directed towards the practice of spiritual training, intended to assist the spiritual improvement of his correspondents, his invitations 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 personal discipline with communal salvation. As well as helping the shared progress towards salvation, spiritual training for every individual soul was expected to result in the enhancement of spiritual affinities and the affectionate relationship in the community.

⁹⁸ Pollmann 2005, 230.

⁹⁹ Rebillard 2012b, 51.

¹⁰⁰ Ebbeler 2012, 15.