

Charity in the *De Doctrina Christiana*: The Bible as *Roman á Clef*

John C. Médaille

"Whoever... thinks that he understands the divine scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build up the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand them at all (DC I,86)."

The Sacred Scrolls and the Holy Book

St. Augustine wrote the *De Doctrina Christiana* at a time when the very notion of scripture was undergoing a change; the "divine scriptures" were becoming the "canonized" scripture and on their way to becoming "Bible" (cf. DC II, 24). In other words, the diverse collection of scrolls that made up the scriptures was becoming a single and well-defined book. Now, no one would expect a collection of scrolls, written over a thousand year period by a wide variety of authors coming from markedly different traditions and points of view, to have a single theme or to be free of "contradictions." Our expectations of a "book," however, are quite different. We expect a book (unless it is an anthology) to be written by a single author or closely related group of authors, to be written over a relatively brief period of time, to have a common theme, and to be relatively free of contradictions. These expectations were becoming attached to the Bible, especially under the pressure of criticism by the Manicheans. Indeed, while a Manichean himself, Augustine had ridiculed the contradictions; now, as a fledgling Christian, he had to defend those same scriptures from these same charges.

The question of time and authorship needed no attention, since it was deemed that God was in some way, not clearly understood, the ultimate "author" of the scriptures, and for God all "time" is the present. The question of "contradiction," however, is more difficult, since the various authors did not consult each other and may not even have been aware of each other, or if they were, they were not at all concerned with harmonizing the texts. If Luke, for example, was aware (as he probably was) that Matthew had a different genealogy for Christ, he was not at all concerned with this fact, since he had a different purpose in mind and used a different genealogy, one more suited to that purpose; it only becomes a sore point when it becomes part of a single book. But divergent genealogies are the least of the problems. More

telling are the passages that are "harsh and even cruel" (DC III, 39) and which seem to be at odds with the story of divine love.

Augustine handles these difficult problems by considering the Bible from its ultimate end: the building up of charity. He does this by setting up a series of dualities as hermeneutic categories: The literal and the figurative; *agape* and *eros*. He then applies a simple rule: That in the scripture which preaches *agape* is to be taken literally, and that which seems to do the opposite is to be taken figuratively as a condemnation of *eros*.

The first pair of opposites concerns signs, and the second deals with imparted realities (*verba, res*). Biblical language is seen as an arrangement of signs signifying two inseparable attitudes: condemnation of cupidity... and glorification of charity... (Margerie, p. 28).

It is fair to ask at this point if such a hermeneutic key actually arises from the text, or whether it is something imposed. Indeed, has he taken a diverse group of writings and turned them into a *roman á clef*, and if so, is there any justification for doing so, aside from an apologetic imperative?

Love, Dual and Duality

Love for St. Augustine is both dual and half of a duality. Love, properly speaking, involves both the love of God and the love of neighbor.¹ The love of neighbor itself involves two basic relationships: "First, a person is to love his neighbor as God does (*sicut Deus*); and second, he is to love his neighbor as he loves himself (*tanquam se ipsum*) (Arendt, p. 93)." This love of neighbor is not, however, something done for the sake of the neighbor primarily, but something subordinate to the love of God, and on account of God, "For the divinely established rule of love

¹ Actually, it is a triplet, since it also encompasses love of self; but since self-love does not need to be "commanded," we speak of the "dual charity."

says 'you shall love you neighbor as yourself' but God 'with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind' (DC I, 42)." And further, "every human being, *qua* human being, should be loved on God's account; and God should be loved for himself. (DC I, 59)." Thus it is through this love of neighbor that we love God. "When you enjoy a human being in God, you are enjoying God rather than that human being. (DC I, 79)." This love of the neighbor in the love of God is *caritas*.

To divorce this love of neighbor from the love of God would be to place our hopes in a mere human: "For if we enjoy one another in ourselves, we remain as it were on the road and put our hopes of happiness on a human being (DC I, 77)." This pinning our hopes on another human destroys both the relationship to God and the proper relationship to ourselves. As such, it constitutes the very essence of lust. "By lust I mean the impulse of one's mind to enjoy oneself and one's neighbor and any corporeal thing not on account of God (DC III, 37)."

Thus "love" is a duality. When things and persons are loved for God, it is *caritas* or *agape*; when they are loved for their own sake or enjoyed for the sake, it is *cupiditas* or *eros*. *Cupiditas* includes even the natural and legal enjoyment of sex, which Augustine condemns in the harshest terms.

Those men of old knew that the enjoyment of sex with their wives was a form of unrestrained abuse. ... people who, just with a single wife, not only exceed the limit appropriate to the procreation of children... do not consider it possible that the men of old treated their many wives with self-control and in doing so simply fulfilled the duty, required of their times, of continuing the race (DC III, 62-63).

This *caritas/cupiditas* dichotomy, this division into love and lust, is at the heart of Augustine's analysis of scripture; using this division he will be able to interpret the signs of scripture and "know" whether to treat them as "literal" or "figurative." We can see, in passing, the root of the problem that so many later interpreters of Augustine have had. Psychoanalytic readings of the great saint are a dime a dozen, and usually incorrect.² If anything, St. Augustine evidences a great respect for the

² For an excellent discussion of the errors of these theories, see Garry Wills, *St. Augustine* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1999) pp. xvii-xx.

body. The real problem is that he places a chasm between *eros* and *agape* when in fact they are connected, and from the absolutism of this division alone all the problems arise. The problem for St. Augustine is not, I suspect, a psychological one, but wholly intellectual. Forced to find a methodology that give meaning to the "harsh and cruel passages," the love/lust dichotomy provides a ready-made criteria for determining which passages should be read "literally" and which "figuratively."

Figuring out the Figurative

With the dichotomy in place, the whole interpretive scheme becomes clear.

As well as this rule, which warns us not to pursue a figurative (that is, metaphorical) expression as if it were literal, we must add a further one: not to accept a literal one as if it were figurative. We must first explain the way to discover whether an expression is literal or figurative. Generally speaking, it is this: anything in the divine discourse that cannot be related either to good morals or to the true faith should be taken as figurative. Good morals have to do with our love of God and our neighbor, the true faith with our understanding of God and our neighbor. (DC III, 33-34).

Here the whole interpretive schema is complete. The text is divided into the literal and the figurative based solely on its relationship to double charity. Those texts which reinforce charity must be read as literal, but those that don't are assigned another meaning: "Any harsh or even cruel word or deed attributed to God or his saints that is found in the holy scriptures applies to the destruction of the realm of lust (DC III, 39)."

Note that the judgment of what is "figurative" is not something that arises from the text itself. Normally a reader would judge a passage to be "metaphorical" if it had only an obscure meaning when taken literally and thus seems to be pointing to something beyond itself. But in Augustine's interpretative schema, it does not matter if a clear meaning is available; the only thing that matters is whether the meaning can clearly be related to good morals; if it can't then it must be a metaphor for the destruction of lust. The love/lust dichotomy thus provides the interpretive key to the scripture. Moreover, the *intent* of the author is lost in this schema. Although Augustine does talk about the intent of the author, he seems to have in mind *God* and

not the human author; it is God's intent that he is wrestling with, and not the intent of Moses or Isaiah, or any other author, or at least not when the passage is judged to be "figurative."

We talk of a *roman à clef* when the reader needs a key to interpret the text, and a key that does not arise from the text itself; normally this refers to "historical" novels where the characters are thinly disguised versions of "real" persons, but the reader needs the appropriate historical knowledge to properly decode the text. Such knowledge, coming from outside the text, provides the key to proper interpretation. For St. Augustine's scripture, the interpretive *clef* is the cleft between love and lust. This key allows the reader to assign each passage, very neatly, to literal or figurative categories. But it is clearly something imposed on the text. It seems to be the classic "hermeneutic circle," in which one decides what the text means *a priori* even though the meaning is supposed to arise from the text. Once having accepted the scheme, there is no way out of it and the circle is complete. Moreover, since such a method cannot be used by any other discipline that normally examines texts, the interpretation would seem to remain closed and static; literary criticism, historical criticism, tradition criticism, etc. cannot gain a foothold in such a closed schema. At least from the standpoint of the tools of textual analysis, whether ancient or modern, such an interpretative schema must appear arbitrary and absurd. Is there any way to rescue the reading of St. Augustine from this apparent absurdity, or must we simply regard it as an example of the hermeneutic circle at work?

La Roman du Jesu

One thing that is clear is that Augustine is not attempting to provide a novel reading of scriptures; on the contrary, he reads it as a member of the Church of Christ and according to the tradition he has received. The most important element of that tradition is that Christ is the end and fulfillment of all the scriptures. The sole guide for the Church's interpretation is the life of Jesus. Thus the ultimate interpreter of scripture is Christ, and we may read his interpretation in the Gospel. This interpretation cannot be read in any way except from the dual charity taught by Christ himself. We can, and must, speak of Christ's "interpretation" of the scriptures. It is true that he accomplished his mission "according to the scriptures," but that does not mean that the mission is something

"imposed" on him from the outside. Rather Jesus, familiar with the Scriptures at least from the age of 12, must interpret them in the light of the Father's will for him, and find the best way to accomplish his mission.³

Thus it is the interpretation of Jesus that gives coherence and unity to the diverse texts. In Jesus alone, the scripture becomes a "book": the *Roman du Jesu*. Further, we can retain the original meaning of *roman*, that is, a romance, since it deals with the Creator's unwavering and largely unrequited love for his creation. This then is the interpretive *clef*. It is not so much in the dichotomy between love and lust, and in the unwavering love of Jesus and the failure to find that love returned.

Seen from the ultimate end, the diverse scrolls indeed become a single book and the schema given my Augustine retains its validity, at least in general if not in all the particulars. Further, this provides room for the other interpretative disciplines to have their proper scope. Augustine "does not deny the universally valid distinction between immediate, mediate, and ultimate end, nor its potential application in the interpretation of scripture (Margarie, p. 32)." Theology must be the arbiter of the ultimate ends of scripture, but the interpretive sciences properly operate on the immediate and mediate ends. Or to state the situation another way, The scriptures, as a diverse set of texts, as subject to all the disciplines that may enlighten us as to their origin, history, and meanings. But as a single book, the "Bible", they are given an ultimate coherence, unity, and purpose by the life of Christ. These two points of view are capable of enlightening each other, and thus are capable of progress and of avoiding a hermeneutic circle.

³ On this point, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Christ's Mission and Person" in *Theo-Drama III; Dramatis Personae*, (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1992), pp. 149-262.