HEART IN PILGRIMAGE: 
ST AUGUSTINE’S READING OF THE PSALMS

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In the Spring of 2004, Fordham University inaugurated the nation’s first annual lecture dedicated to the Orthodox Christian tradition in the United States. In 2007, Fordham hosted an international ecumenical conference dedicated to exploring the reception of St Augustine in the Orthodox Church. The conference opened with the conferral by Fordham University of an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters on His Eminence, Archbishop Demetrios, Primate of the Greek Orthodox Church of America. Archbishop Demetrios had delivered the inaugural Orthodoxy in America Lecture in 2004. This booklet is the 2007 Orthodoxy in America Lecture, which was offered by the Rev. Dr. Andrew Louth in honor of Archbishop Demetrios and which served as the keynote address for the Orthodox Readings of Augustine Conference. We would like to thank the many sponsors of the conference, especially the Kallinikeion Foundation and the Augustinian Institute of Villanova University, without whose support the conference would not have been possible. We would also like to thank Mr. and Mrs. Kenneth Hickman, whose generous gift made possible the printing of this lecture.
My argument in this paper is that the obstacles to a true appreciation of St Augustine by the Orthodox are fundamentally the same as the obstacles faced by Western Christians. And also that the remedy in both cases is the same. That might seem very surprising, but I hope I shall be able to convince you of its truth.

The problem with understanding Augustine—both for the East and for the West—is that we think we understand him perfectly well already. Virtually no one comes to Augustine with no preconceptions: that, at least, is my conclusion after nearly forty years of teaching early Christian doctrine, including Augustine, to undergraduate students in England. For Christians of the Western tradition, this is because he has been so influential. Scholasticism and the Reformation would be inconceivable without Augustine. But which Augustine? He wrote an enormous amount, so much that his biographer, Possidius, said of his works, that “there are so many that there is hardly a student who has been able to read and get acquainted with them all.”

The Augustine who governs our preconceptions tends to be the Augustine of the great controversies. First of all, there is Augustine, the “Doctor of Grace,” the champion of the grace of God against the Pelagians, someone who elaborated a doctrine of grace that has left later theologians debating whether he allowed any room for human freewill at all. Certainly one who shored up his doctrine of grace with a doctrine of original sin, indeed of original guilt, so that all human beings come into the world worthy of damnation, forming a massa peccati. Augustine also pressed his understanding of the priority of grace to the point of elaborating a doctrine of predestination, even a doctrine of “double predestination,” whereby
human beings are created by God either for election or damnation, regardless of
the kind of lives they may live. Or, secondly, there is the Augustine who opposed
the Donatists, those North African Christians who maintained that the Catholic
Church in North Africa had ceased to exist as a Church, owing to its collusion with
bishops who had forfeited grace by their cowardly behaviour during the Great
Persecution at the beginning of the fourth century—nearly a century before
Augustine’s own engagement with the Donatists. This Augustine developed a
document of the Church that sees it as forming a mixed community of saints and
sinners until the last judgment, with sacraments that are valid, whatever the
moral state of the minister, for it is Christ himself who is the true minister of
the sacraments. In the controversy with the Donatists, Augustine was eventually
driven to accept the use of persecution against recalcitrant Donatists. And then
there is the Augustine who spent the best part of a decade of his early manhood
as a Manichee. Despite his eventual return to the faith of his childhood, and of his
mother, there were those, even in his lifetime, who claimed that Augustine was
still a covert Manichee, sharing their hatred of the body and sex. There is also
the Augustine of the major works—the City of God and On the Trinity. The City
of God is often treated as a quarry for the political ideas of the Western Middle
Ages, while it is in his treatise On the Trinity, that many Orthodox are determined
to find the Augustine who, in his doctrine of the Trinity, effectively broke the
unity of the Una Sancta—the “One, Holy Church”—by his endorsement of the
document of the double procession of the Holy Spirit, the Filioque.

It is not easy for us, Christians of either the East or the West, to get behind these
enormous preconceptions, and many might ask, why should we?—Augustine is
the doctor of grace and that is what is important about him. But if we follow these
preconceptions, we are very soon reading Augustine in the light of later theology,
making him take sides in subsequent controversies that he never envisaged. If
one actually starts to read Augustine, even the Augustine of the controversies
outlined above, one quickly finds oneself in the presence of someone with a quick
intelligence, who thought on his feet, whose ideas are more often tentative, not
definitive, who was constantly exploring what it meant to confess Christ, to seek to follow him, to be a member of his body, to submit to the transforming effect of the grace of the Resurrection. These controversies occupied Augustine’s time, and certainly shaped his thinking, but the fundamental reality of Augustine’s life as a priest and bishop was as the pastor of the Catholic Christian community in Hippo. It was there that day by day he prayed with his congregation, preached to them, celebrated the Eucharist as their bishop. For roughly thirty-five years that was his principal, daily concern. Once a bishop, he never left North Africa, but spent his whole time there, mostly at Hippo, though also in Carthage; he preached several times a week and many of those sermons have been preserved for us, though many more have been lost. It has been estimated that Augustine must have preached about 8,000 homilies, of which 546 survive; if you add to them the homilies on the Psalms, and the Gospel and First Epistle of John, the total of surviving sermons comes to a little over 1,000, which is about one eighth of his preaching. But this is a good deal, and it is here, I think, that we find the “hidden Augustine,” the priest and pastor.

So what I want to do in this lecture is to peer behind these preconceptions, and simply listen to Augustine the preacher and pastor. In this way, Christians of both Western and Eastern traditions can find themselves in the presence of a Father of the Church, one whose voice speaks with authority from the heart of the Una Sancta. In particular, it is Augustine as commentator on the Psalms that I want to explore with you, for in his Enarrationes in Psalmos, we have a complete series of reflections on the Psalms, mostly in the form of homilies given to his congregations. Here, I think, we find the heart of Augustine: a “heart in pilgrimage,” to borrow a phrase from the English poet and priest, George Herbert.

Why these reflections on the psalms? Several reasons come to mind. The first is that the psalms are fundamental to the consciousness of the Church: they are constantly quoted from the New Testament onwards; they have become
the backbone of the Church’s regular—daily and weekly—pattern of prayer; in many contexts it came to be expected that Christians would learn the whole Psalter by heart: the second canon of the Seventh Ecumenical Synod, for example, requires that any candidate for the episcopate should know the Psalter by heart. Augustine shared this sense of the importance and centrality of the Psalter; Possidius tells us that, on his death bed, Augustine “ordered those Psalms of David which are especially penitential to be copied out and, when he was very weak, used to lie in bed facing the wall where the sheets of paper were put up, gazing at them and reading them, and copiously and continuously weeping as he read.” His *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, the title given them by Erasmus, were put together by Augustine with some deliberation. Most of the homilies were actually preached to a congregation, either at Hippo or at Carthage; more than a third of them in a single year: 412. These homilies were supplemented by others that were never preached, so far as we know, but were dictated, so that, together with the preached homilies, the whole of the Psalter is covered. The homilies on the first thirty-two Psalms seem to have been composed as a kind of exercise in sustained reading and commentary, just after his ordination as a priest. Various others seem to have been dictated towards 420, with the explicit intention of completing the *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, including a set of thirty homilies on the long Psalm 118 (119 in the Hebrew enumeration). This evident desire to present a complete set of reflections on the psalms underlines the significance that the Psalms had for Augustine.

There are various ways in which we could explore Augustine’s treatment of the psalms. We could trace the themes and images he develops, but that would need much more time than we have at our disposal today. Instead, what I have decided to do is to take one of Augustine’s homilies, and follow it through with you. This will not exactly be a close reading, though it will include some close reading, but it is really an exercise in seeing how Augustine read one of the psalms with his congregation. I have chosen the homily on Psalm 100 (101 in the Hebrew),
which begins: *Misericordiam et iudicium cantabo tibi Domine* (I shall sing to you of mercy and judgment, O Lord). Various considerations guided this choice: among them, that it was actually preached by Augustine to his congregation in Hippo—in Eastertide in 395, when Augustine was on the threshold of consecration as a bishop—and that it is not too long.

Augustine’s method of exegesis is always to follow the words closely, to interrogate them. This is partly a matter of his rhetorical training; such word-by-word consideration was what he had learned in his years as a student. But even more it is because these are the words of holy men inspired by the Holy Spirit: each word is significant, the order of the words, and their meaning. So Augustine begins with what is meant by singing to God of mercy and judgment—mercy and judgment together:

> Let no one delude himself into thinking himself free of punishment because of God’s mercy, for it is also judgment; and let no one changing for the better be terrified by God’s judgment, because mercy precedes it. For when men judge, sometimes they are overcome with mercy and act against justice; and there seems to be mercy in them and not judgment; sometimes, however, they want to adhere to strict judgment, and they lose sight of mercy. God, however, neither loses the severity of judgment in the goodness of mercy, nor in judging with severity does he lose the goodness of mercy.

However, Augustine says we must observe the order: mercy, first, and then judgment. “If we distinguish these two by times, we shall perhaps find that now—modo, for the time being—is the time of mercy, while the time of judgment is future.” Why, he asks? First of all, look to God, the Father. Remember what the Lord has said: “Be like your heavenly Father... Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven, who makes the sun rise on both good and bad, and rain to fall on the just and the unjust.”
Behold mercy. When you see the just and the unjust looking at the same sun, enjoying the same light, drinking from the same fountains, watered by the same rain, filled by the same fruits of the earth, breathing the same air, having equally the world's goods, do not think that God is unjust, who gives these things equally to the just and the unjust. For it is the time of mercy, not yet the time of judgment. For unless God first spares us in mercy, he will not find those he can crown in judgment. It is therefore the time of mercy, when the patience of God leads those who sin to repentance.8

This is how Augustine sets the scene for his interpretation of the psalm: we are living in the time of mercy; there awaits us the time of judgment. He continues this contrast between mercy and judgment by drawing a contrast between the Latin verbs donare and reddere (to grant and to give back, or to recompense). The time of mercy is the time of donare, the time of gifts; the time of judgment will be the time of reddere, the time of recompense. Augustine illustrates this from the example of Paul, who was first a blasphemer and persecutor, but then shown mercy, so that Christ Jesus might show his long-suffering in him (cf. 1 Tim. 1.13, 16). At that time, “the Lord came to give to Paul, not to recompense him.” He then goes on to quote from 2 Timothy: “For now I am being sacrificed, the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith”—all this, Augustine comments, in the time of mercy. “Hear, now, of judgment: For the rest there is laid up for me the crown of justice, which the Lord, the just judge, will recompense me (reddet mihi) in that day. When he gives, he is merciful; when he gives back, he will be judge, because ‘I will sing to you of mercy and judgment, O Lord.’”9

But we must not presume on God’s mercy, Augustine continues:

Therefore, brethren, because we have the time of mercy, let us not delude ourselves, let us not excuse ourselves, let us not say: God
always pardons. Look, what I did yesterday, God has pardoned; what I do today, God also pardons; I shall do it tomorrow, because God pardons. You are aware of mercy, and you do not fear judgment. But if you want to sing of mercy and of judgment, understand that he thus pardons, that he may correct, not that you may remain in wickedness.  

And Augustine goes on to quote from Psalm 49, where the psalmist represents God as upbraiding humankind for all kinds of sins and cruelties, ending: “these things you did, and I kept silence (Haec fecisti, et tacui).” “What does this mean: I kept silence,” Augustine asks. “It cannot mean: I did not rebuke, but rather: I have not judged. For how could he keep silence who day by day cries out in the Scriptures, in the Gospel, in his preachers? I kept silence from punishment (supplicium), not from words.” The time of mercy is the time to learn our faults and repent, and not to presume of God’s long suffering. This is what is meant by “singing of mercy and judgment”:

Because therefore mercy and judgment is sung to us, we also who act with mercy can be sure in the expectation of judgment; and let us be in his body, that we also may sing. For it is Christ who is singing this; if only the head sings, it is sung from the Lord, and is no concern of ours; if, however, it is the whole Christ who sings, that is the head and his body, it is in his members to cleave to him through faith, through hope, and through love; you both sing in him and exult in him; because he works in you, and thirsts in you, and hungers and suffers tribulation in you. Up to the present he is dying in you, and you have now been raised in him... Therefore, my brothers, Christ is singing; but how, you know, for I know that you are not ignorant about him. The Lord Christ is the Word of God, through whom everything was made. His Word, that he might redeem us, became flesh and dwelt among us; God who is above all
became man, the Son of God equal to the Father; he became man for this, that God the man might be mediator between humans and God, and reconcile those placed apart, join together the separated, recall those estranged and lead back the wanderers: for this he became man. He therefore becomes the head of the Church, having both head and members. Seek then his members; for the time being they groan throughout the whole world; then they will rejoice—at the end, at the crown of justice, with which, as Paul says, the Lord, the just judge, will reward me in that day. For the time being, therefore, we sing in hope, all gathered together into one. For clothed with Christ, we are Christ with our head.11

Mercy and judgment are the marks of this age and of the one to come; we live in the age of mercy, the mercy shown us in Christ. In union with him, though we groan in this present age, we can also sing—sing of mercy, but also sing of judgment, as we look to the age to come and its dawning.

Augustine has spent the first third of this sermon dwelling on this contrast between mercy and judgment. The rest of the sermon continues under this overarching theme.

The next verse reads: “I will sing psalms (psalmam) and understand in the way of purity (via immaculata), when you come to me.” It is only in the way of purity, Augustine comments, that we can sing psalms and understand. “If you want to understand, sing in the way of purity, that is, work for God in gladness (in hilaritate).”12 What, then, Augustine asks, is this way of purity (or “life of purity”: the text now reads vita, instead of via)? And he answers his question by quoting the next verse: “I walked in the innocence of my heart, in the midst of my house.” “This way of purity begins in innocence, and also reaches its end in it.” But what is meant by innocence, Augustine’s interrogation of the text continues? The Latin word innocentia suggests something not harmed or not harmful: from the verb
noceo, to harm. And, Augustine remarks, “there are two ways in which someone can cause harm: either by making someone unhappy (miserum), or by deserting someone in their unhappiness; for you do not want to be made unhappy by another, nor do you want to be deserted by another, if you are unhappy.” There is a play of words here, very important for grasping Augustine’s sequence of ideas: the play between misericordia, mercy, and miser, unhappy, pitiable, miserable. Mercy, misericordia, is what those who are miseri need: the time of misericordia is the time of the miseri, it is also the time of the nocentes, those who harm others and reduce them to being miseri. The nocentes do this in two ways: by active harm—by violence, oppression, robbery, covetousness, calumny—by what Augustine calls generally studium malevolentiae; and by neglecting the needy, despising the tears of the unhappy. Either way, the one who does this alienat cor suum—makes his heart strange to himself. If we ask who is innocent, the answer is: “One who neither harms another nor harms himself. For one who harms himself is not innocent.” And Augustine goes on to comment, “But if someone corrupts himself, if he overthrow God’s temple in himself, what do you expect, that he will be merciful to others, and spare the miserable? He who is cruel to himself, could he be merciful to another? The whole of justice therefore can be reduced to the single word: innocence.” So, “the one who wants to harm others has first harmed himself; nor can he walk about, because there is no ‘where’ (quia non est ubi). For all wickedness is subject to narrowness: only innocence is broad, where it may walk about.” The freedom to walk can only be exercised in the space provided by innocence of heart; there one is free to walk “in the midst of my house.” Augustine picks this up and comments:

He says the “midst of his house”—or the Church itself; for Christ walks about in it—or his heart, for our heart is our interior house, as he expressed it when he said above: “in the innocence of my heart.” What is the innocence of his heart? The midst of his house. Whoever does evil in this house is driven outside it... Whoever does not have a peaceful heart cannot freely dwell in his heart..."
And Augustine goes on to cite the example of the paralytic whom the Lord healed and told him to “take up his bed and go into his house”: “he takes up his bed and rules his body; now he goes into his house, enters into his conscience; now he finds broad place (latam), where he talks around, sings, and understands.”

Note how this exegesis turns on the idea that the wicked person has damaged himself, has driven himself out of his heart, which has become too narrow to inhabit. In contrast, the innocent harms no one, and finds within himself a broad space, where he can walk about in freedom.

There follow a series of verses in which the one who “sings of mercy and judgment” expresses his attitude towards those who “work iniquity” (facientes praevaricationem), the “crooked heart” (cor pravum), the proud, and whose heart is insatiable. The psalmist will have nothing to do with them: he hates them, he will drive them away, he will not eat with them. Augustine is at pains to make sure that such hatred is not misunderstood. The psalmist “hates those who work iniquity” (facientes praevaricationem: the Latin praevaricatio has a very different meaning from our English “prevarication”—it means deeply culpable evil). “But,” says Augustine, “you must hate the prevaricators, not the men. There is one man the prevaricator, but see that he has two names—man and prevaricator: God made man, man made himself a prevaricator; love in him what God made, drive away in him what he has made of himself.”

Or, a little later on: “Behold the good persecutor persecutes not man, but sin.”

Mention of the cor pravum provokes a discussion of prayer, which is only true prayer—prayer from an “upright heart” (cor rectum)—if it wants what God wants. Augustine considers, briefly, Christ’s prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, and his expression of “sadness, even unto death.” Augustine comments, “But what was that voice, save the sound of our weakness?”—Christ, as head of the body, gives expression to the groaning of the members. When he comes to consider the psalmist’s refusal to eat with the proud and those with insatiable hearts, Augustine considers the counter-example in the Gospel, where Christ eats with the proud Pharisee,
how the prostitute wept at the Lord’s feet and caused the Pharisee silently to blame Christ’s ignorance of the woman’s nature. Augustine comments, “How did he know that Christ was ignorant, unless he suspected that he did not know, because he did not push her away? Because, if it had been him, he would have repelled her. The Lord, however, not only knew that the woman was a sinner, but as a physician saw that the wounds of that proud man were incurable.” Christ could use the meal with the proud man at least to warn him of the danger of his pride. For us, Augustine warns, “Beware, lest in their banquets you are caught in the snares of the devil.”

Augustine finally comes to the last verse of the psalm: “In the morning I put to death all the sinners on the earth.” “This is a dark saying,” he remarks, “we do well to pay attention, for it is the very end of the psalm.” The psalmist gives his reason in the final words: “that I may utterly destroy from the city of the Lord all workers of iniquity.” So, Augustine comments, there are workers of iniquity within the city of the Lord, but that is, as we well know, because it is still the “time of mercy”; but the morning will be the time of judgment, then the workers of iniquity will be destroyed. If morning is the coming time of judgment, then the present time of mercy is night, and the theme of night,nox, leads to this reflection:

For at the present, while you do not see my heart and I do not see yours, it is night. You sought I do not know what from someone. You did not get it; you thought yourself despised, but maybe you were not despised; for you do not see the heart—and suddenly you blaspheme. In the night pardon is to be given you when you go astray. Someone loves you, I do not know who, and you think that he hates you; or he hates you, and you think that he loves you; but whatever it is, it is night. Do not fear, trust in Christ; in him grasp the day. You can think nothing evil of him, for we are sure and certain that he cannot be deceived. He loves us. Of ourselves,
however, we cannot yet be certain. For God knows our love for one
another; we, however, even if we love one another, who knows how
such love works out among us? Why does no one see the heart?
Because it is night. In this night temptations abound. It is, as it
were, of this night that the psalmist says, “You have placed darkness
and made night; in it all the beasts of the forest move. The young
lions (catuli leonum) roar after their prey and they seek their food
from God.” In the night the young lions seek their food. Who are
these young lions? The princes and powers of this air, the demons
and the angels of the devil. How do they seek their food? When they
tempt. But they do not come near it, unless God gives them power,
for thus it is said: “they seek their food from God.” The devil sought
Job to tempt him. What food? The rich, the fat, the just man of God,
to whom the Lord bore testimony and said: “a man without blame,
he was a true worshipper of God.” He sought him to tempt him,
seeking food from God. And he accepted that he should be tempted
but not crushed, purified but not oppressed, or perhaps not purified
but proved. However, those who are tempted are sometimes
handed over for some secret reason into the hands of the tempter,
because, perhaps, they are delivered over to their desires. For the
devil harms no one, unless he receives power from God. But when?
In the night. What does this mean: in the night? In this time...

“This time,” to which Augustine refers, is the time of mercy. But this time will
pass, and in the morning will come the time of judgment. And what is meant by
“in the morning”? Augustine ends his sermons with these reflections:

What is: in the morning? While the night is still passing. Why does
he still pardon? Because it is the time of mercy. Why does he not
always pardon? Because ‘of mercy and judgment I shall sing to you,
O Lord.’ Brothers, let no one delude himself: all who work iniquity
will be put to death; Christ puts them to death in the morning, and destroys them from his city. But while it is still the time of mercy, let us hear him. Wherever he calls out through the law, through the prophets, through the psalms, through letters, through the Gospels. See that he is not silent, that he pardons, that he distributes mercy. But beware, because the judgment is to come.  

The voice of Augustine the preacher is a fascinating voice. It unfolds the message of the psalm with a sense of great respect for the intelligence of his people. He does not try to put them off with generalizing morality, nor does he make light of the difficulties of the psalm. Even in looking at a single psalm, we recognize several guiding themes: it is Christ’s voice we hear in the psalm, and part of what is meant by understanding the psalm is learning how to join our voice to Christ’s; the Christ singing in the psalm is Christ the head of the Church, of which we are the members; in this sense, the Church links this time of trial and temptation with the future time of glory, when Christ will be revealed as judge; finding Christ in the psalm also leads, in both minor and more important ways, to finding the Gospel reflected in the psalm. Above all, perhaps, we hear in this homily, the voice of St Augustine the pastor, who had a deep understanding of the darkness of the human condition. This sense of the darkness of the human condition lies behind his concept of original sin, and the frailty of the human will, but here, Augustine does not systematize this insight: it remains an insight, based on human experience, an insight we find, expressed in very similar terms, in the Macarian Homilies, for instance. At this level, of pastoral concern and psychological insight, we can all—Christians of both Western and Eastern traditions—find a voice that has still a great deal to say to us all.
3 Possidius, *Vita* 31.2 (Hoare, 242).
4 For a good introduction to the *En. in Ps.*, see the article by Michael Cameron in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopaedia*, Allan D. Fitzgerald, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 290-96, with useful bibliography. I have taken my information about the dating of the homilies from the *Corpus Christianorum* edition (see below, n. 5), xv–xix, which may be more positive than the evidence can sustain. See also, Rowan Williams, “Augustine and the Psalms,” *Interpretation* 58 (2004): 17–27.
6 *En. in Ps.* 100.1.
7 *Mt.* 5.48, 44–5.
8 *En. in Ps.* 100.1.
9 Ibid., 100.2.
10 Ibid., 100.3.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 100.4.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 100.5.
15 Ibid., 100.8.
16 Ibid., 100.9.
17 Ibid., 100.12.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 100.13.