AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO:
SIN, GRACE, AND EXPERIENCE

The task of the workshop in patristic theology was to deal with human freedom in the context of the convention theme of experience and theology. The workshop treated the theme in three parts: presentation, response, and discussion. The presentation by Marianne Djuth began with Prosper of Aquitaine's letter to Augustine, in which he had expressed the fear that human freedom was being lost in Augustine's doctrine of grace. She then proceeded to analyze the relationship of grace and freedom in the early and late Augustine as well as various interpretations of Augustine's teaching on grace. The response by Thomas A. Smith recalled the significance of the Greek tradition in the teaching of Pelagius and the Pelagians. He analyzed the Greek vocabulary pertaining to grace and free will and its Latin counterparts. Finally, the discussion brought out the importance of Augustine's interpretation of Romans and the genuine significance of original sin in Augustine's life and theology.

PART I: *POTESTAS* AND THE *POSSIBILITAS BONI*

In her insightful paper entitled "The hermeneutics of *De libero arbitrio III*: Are There Two Augustines?" Marianne Djuth came to three conclusions. First, in answer to the question posed by the title of her study, she insisted that there is only one Augustine. Although the concept of human freedom developed in Augustine's later anti-Pelagian works goes beyond the position of his earlier anti-Manichaean *De libero arbitrio,* he in no way contradicts himself. While his *De libero arbitrio,* completed in 395, attempted to explain the will's natural constitution, his anti-Pelagian *De natura et gratia,* completed in 415, inquired into the origin of the good will. Second, Pelagian and Massilian critics of Augustine failed to understand his crucial distinction between the will's natural power of choice, its *potestas,* and the *possibilitas boni,* which is not a necessary or constitutive part of the will. As a fallen being, the moral agent does not have sufficient strength of choice to summon forth liberty from his nature. He must depend upon God's mercy for the restoration of the capability to choose good effectively. In the fallen moral agent the power of choice has been corrupted, or diminished in strength, precisely on account of the loss of the *possibilitas boni,* which represents the additional strength needed for choice to function in an incorrupt manner. Third, Augustine steered a very careful middle course between the extremes of Manichaeism and Pelagianism. Therefore, his analysis of human nature is far more complex than Mani's evil nature and Pelagius' good nature. Avoiding the extremes of Manichaean pessimism and Pelagian optimism,

Augustine develops a realistic concept of free choice which is compatible with
fallen human nature.

PART II: FROM *EROS* TO *PATHOS*

In his critical response Thomas A. Smith fundamentally agreed with Djuth's
conclusions. However, he considered the clash between the Greek and Latin
traditions regarding concepts and vocabulary pertinent to the problem at hand.
First, Smith turned his attention to human will in the Greek patristic tradition.
Gregory of Nyssa based his anthropology on Gen 1:26, where humankind is
defined as created in the image of God. Thus, the human being is naturally
directed toward his or her image, namely, God; or in Platonic terms humans are
essentially *eros* attracted to God as like to like. Creation in the image of God
also implies the power of self-determination. Only after the human being turned
away from God did the natural *eros* become *pathos,* a passion or drive. The
problem then for fallen humanity is to purify oneself of passion so that the power
of self-determination is redirected to God through pure *eros.* Second, whereas for
Gregory the drives or desires can be reoriented by their object to become pure
eros through the exercise of decision or choice, Augustine refuses to accept the
notion that an object of knowledge can transform the will. For Augustine God's
grace recreates the human will turning a bad will into a good will. For Gregory
the will does not require recreation but purification though the Holy Spirit. Third,
Pelagius manifests both a pronounced anti-Manichaean orientation and a
continuity with the Greek anthropological tradition. The congruence of the
teachings of Pelagius and Gregory on the will's role in salvation is so striking
that Gregory of Nyssa is sometimes described as "Pelagian before Pelagius."
Therefore, if the Pelagians failed to understand Augustine, perhaps the difficulty
lies in Augustine's novel and for them somewhat obscure understanding of the
voluntas as a faculty that has been irrevocably turned toward evil.

PART III: ORIGINAL SIN

Subsequent discussion dealt with five major issues. First, Paul's letter to the
Romans was central to Augustine's teaching on human freedom. In 397
Augustine wrote *De diversis questionibus ad Simplicianum* in order to deal with
critical problem of human freedom raised in Simplician's questions concerning
Romans. This was a turning point in the thought of Augustine and a necessary
prerequisite to his self-understanding as described in his *Confessions.* Second,
further questions and comments highlighted the importance of original sin.
Before the fall nature could be the same as grace, but after the fall nature was
the state into which human beings are born. While in the Middle Ages original
sin described the status of an infant for twenty-four hours, Augustine actually
experienced original sin in his person and suffered great anguish dealing with the
state of original sin, in which he found himself. For Augustine baptism relieved
a tremendous inner anxiety because through baptism the burden of original sin

had been lifted. Third, the question of continual choices was raised as well as involuntary resistance to the good. In antiquity Stoicism had developed a concept of fate or necessity which was compatible with the individual as a voluntary agent. Perhaps one may find here a Stoic influence upon Augustine, who endorsed "predestination" but not "predestinarianism." The former concept affirms divine providence while preserving human freedom. The latter maintains a coercive form of necessary predetermination. Fourth, the question of experience was raised. Augustine, of course, had an intense personal conversion experience, which he generalized for the rest of humanity and established as the basis of his theological perspective on freedom. Fifth, Augustine may be credited with having overcome the concept of ancient Greek philosophy that "knowledge is virtue." While Pelagius required obligatory asceticism, Augustine recognized the necessity of divine grace.

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