

EARLY CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

- Topic: Early Christian Response to the Signs of the Times
 Convener: Alexis James Doval, Saint Mary's College of California
 Presenters: Michael Foley, University of Notre Dame
 "The Art of Reading in Augustine's *Confessions*"
 Maureen Tilley, University of Dayton
 "Algiers, Annaba, and Augustine in the 21st Century"

Dr. Michael Foley discussed the art of reading in the *Confessions* of St. Augustine and its possible relevance to contemporary Catholic theology. One can't help but notice that books are everywhere in the *Confessions*, for Augustine is dramatically affected by what he reads, leading him either farther away from or closer to God. Encounters with Virgil, Terence, Sallust, Cicero, Aristotle, Plato, Epicurus, St. Paul, Isaiah, Genesis, and the Psalms punctuate his life. Reading for Augustine is more than deciphering black markings on a page; it is the means for a deeper more accurate understanding of reality. In order to live well, we must read well. The importance of reading is subtly conveyed by where Augustine places references to the key books of his life and the relation he makes between the art of reading and the sacramental life.

Dr. Foley explained how Augustine arranges his literary itinerary chiasmally: the first half of his narration is a series of "misuse of readings," in which Augustine misapplies or misuses Cicero, the Manicheans, and Aristotle. The turning point in his spiritual journey comes when he learns how to read perceptively from Ambrose. From then on, reading is a means to find truth, even causing him to reread the very books he had earlier abused. This device underscores the importance of a thorough and manifold conversion in mastering the art of reading. Augustine shows that the art of reading requires a formation and cultivation of certain natural desires or capacities before it can actually bear any fruit. And that cultivation is made possible by turning the heart and mind to the Good.

This conversion and cultivation is facilitated by a participation in the sacramental life of the church. The thirteen books of the *Confessions* are framed by various sacraments, baptism with books I-IX, Eucharist and orders (priestly and episcopal) with books X-XIII. Augustine's term *sacramentum* was the translation of the Greek word, *mysterion*, mystery. So for him, *sacramentum* was a word pregnant with meaning, as a visible sign of an invisible grace that leads to the grasp of a mystical, or previously hidden, truth.

For Augustine, a truly literate person is a reader of self, God, sacred history, nature and creation; this in turn leads to union with God in love and a life lived well. This is important for understanding the *Confessions*, the purpose of which is to help us become good readers, to meet us at whatever level of literacy we are and to bring us to the point where we may join Augustine in the joyful con-

fessing of God's greatness and our unworthiness. *Tolle lege* is not just the prompt for Augustine's conversion in Milan; it is his solemn imperative to us, to take and read the *Confessions* so that we may be able to take and read the mysteries of the sacred page, of creation, of Church history, and most importantly, of ourselves and God. Once the reader obeys this imperative, the *Confessions* initiates him or her into a dynamic process of *lexic* transformation, of cultivating the master art of reading by word, sacrament, and example, an art as important today as it ever was.

Dr. Maureen Tilley presented a paper on the reclaiming of Augustine by North Africa, especially Algeria. She began by reporting on a recent conference on Augustine hosted by the Algerian government. Its theme was "Augustine: His Africanity and His Universality." She contextualized recent interest in Augustine in North Africa and provided a look at the current state of archeology at places associated with Augustine. Her purpose was to show how Augustine provides a flash point for a sign of the times. The conference was called on the personal initiative of the President of Algeria. His main thematic statement was that in the United Nation's Year of Dialogue between civilizations, Augustine (the Algerian Philosopher) represented the gift of the South (Africa) to the North (Europe). The conference attracted African Islamic scholars interested in how Augustine dealt with topics in their own traditions, for example, free will and divine power. Their interest in entering into dialogue with Christians on these issues is a sign of the changing times, perhaps the beginnings of a new Christian-Islamic dialogue reminiscent of those of the Middle Ages. The conference was attended by men and women with university education interested in claiming Augustine as their own and seeing how his life and message fit their present-day needs. This was a very politically charged aspect of the conference since Algeria has been experiencing considerable tension between its Arab population and its non-Arab Kabyle/Amazigh peoples (also known as Berbers).

Dr. Tilley presented an itinerary of Augustine's life and ministry coupled with slides of modern-day Algeria. Augustine was born and lived most of his episcopate in what is now Algeria, with frequent forays to Carthage and other ancient cities in present-day Algeria and Tunisia. In the eighth century, these areas came to be dominated by Arabs. While Islamic faith and Arab culture became dominant among the elite classes, subaltern populations alternately cooperated and opposed first the Arabs and then the French colonial empire of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The principal concerns of the participants were reflected in three issues that were repeatedly expressed in the discussion questions: "Was Augustine's father a member of the oppressor class? Was Augustine's mother a Berber? Why is Augustine not in our children's textbooks?"

The conference revealed an Algeria very much interested in Augustine, but feeling a need to reclaim him from a Europe that had taken him captive through colonialism. At the same time, Augustine can provide a starting point for true Christian-Islamic dialogue. For example, one presentation showed the con-

vergences between Augustine's *City of God* and al-Farabi's *City of Virtue (Al madina al Fâdila)*. Also, virtue, about which Augustine has so much to say, is a very concrete issue for Muslims today. And finally, reconciling God's omnipotence and human free will and responsibility is a task equally important to Christians and Muslims and pertinent to our struggles with political differences and terrorism.

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BIOETHICS AND HEALTH CARE

Topic: Current Signs in Bioengineering
Convener: Regina Wolfe, Saint John's University, MN
Moderator: David F. Kelly, Duquesne University
Presenter: James J. Walter, Loyola Marymount University

In "The Bioengineering of Planet Earth: Some Scientific, Moral and Theological Consideration," James J. Walter addressed many of the challenges posed by bioengineering and biotechnology, providing an overview of the current state of bioengineering for generalists while simultaneously fostering substantive discussion among those involved in the field.

The first part of the paper provided an update on current trends in genetic bioengineering of plants, animals, and humans and pointed to several important ethical issues. Most genetic engineering projects involving plants fall into one of the following types: engineering for improved crop production; engineering for improved human health, such as edible vaccines; and biopharming, or engineering of plants for alternative nonfood use, such as chemical production. These efforts have met with mixed reactions globally, with greater acceptance in the United States and China, and with resistance in most of Europe (Switzerland being the exception). The benefits of bioengineering of plants include the potential of an abundance of grain production, more diverse and improved foods, crops that are less reliant on the use of chemicals, and transgenic plants that can become "biological factories" to produce drugs, such as interferon, for humans. Ethical concerns include unfair competition for small, privately owned organic farms; unknown environmental and safety issues, such as long-term risks to humans associated with eating transgenic plants or the spread of new viruses to surrounding crops; and questions surrounding the fair allocation of public funds for research.

In addressing animal genetic engineering, Walter focused on the modification of the genetic makeup of animals for human benefit and the creation of transgenic animals by using recombinant DNA (rDNA) modification. He