

HISTORICAL THEOLOGY (I) TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Sacraments and the Global Church in Antiquity: Augustine of Hippo
Convener/Moderator: Franklin T. Harkins, Fordham University (substituting for Lee Bacchi)
Presenters: Kimberly Baker, Saint Vincent College (absent)
Andrew Salzmann, Boston College

This session aimed to investigate the general topic of sacraments and the global church in the theology of Augustine of Hippo. The session was scheduled to consist of two papers: Kimberly Baker's "Christ Spread throughout the World: Augustine's Sacramental Theology of Church;" and Andrew Salzmann's "Sacraments in the Augustinian Tradition: Powerful or Powerless?"

Unfortunately, Kimberly Baker was unable to attend the annual convention and deliver her paper, in which she proposed that Augustine's sacramental theology extends beyond the sacraments themselves to his understanding of the Church. Baker explored Augustine's preaching in the context of the Donatist controversy, in which context the North African bishop maintained that the Catholic sacraments remained valid in spite of the shortcomings of the clergy and in so doing laid a primary foundation for the sacramental theology of Western Christianity. Another layer of sacramentality found in Augustine's anti-Donatist preaching that Baker's paper investigated is his doctrine of *totus Christus*, with Christ himself as head and the Church as body. After introducing the doctrine of *totus Christus* and its transformative dimension, Baker outlined the vivid contrasts that Augustine finds between the Donatist Church and the Catholic Church, emphasizing three characteristics of the latter that captured Augustine's attention: (1) universality; (2) unity with sinners; and (3) solidarity with suffering humanity through works of charity. These three points of contrast are more than mere anti-Donatist polemics, Baker argued; rather, Augustine finds universality, unity, and solidarity as reflecting the gift of love given to Christians in baptism and nurtured in the Eucharist. Because this gift conforms the Church to Christ, love manifests Christ's presence at work in the Church. Properly understood, then, in the context of the theology of *totus Christus*, Augustine's assertion, contra Donatism, that the Catholic Church is spread throughout the world is an affirmation that it is *Christ* who is spread throughout the world in the Catholic Church. Baker's paper concluded with a consideration of how this manifestation of Christ's presence in the Church reveals a sacramental dimension that resonates with Augustine's famous definition of a sacrament as a visible sign of an invisible reality, a sign that participates in that reality and mediates grace.

Andrew Salzmann's paper, "Sacraments in the Augustinian Tradition: Powerful or Powerless," takes up exactly where Baker's leaves off, namely, on precisely this point of whether and to what extent external sacramental signs participate in and mediate the realities that they signify. Salzmann's paper consisted of (1) a presentation of Phillip Cary's case for the "powerlessness of external things in Augustine thought" (Cary, *Outward Signs*, 2008) and (2) Salzmann's own reflections on Cary's argument in light of the predominant medieval understanding of the sacraments as containing and conferring, not merely signifying, grace. In the first part, Salzmann focused on Cary's conclusion that Augustine's semiotics require that the physical sacraments, as external to the inner self, serve only as signs pointing toward heavenly realities reached through inner ascent. Cary terms this an "expressionist semiotics;" external signs merely express what lies hidden within the inner self, as opposed to shaping that self or giving it being. The sacraments, as Augustine famously wrote, are effectively visible words,

operating within the same semiotic field as words and, like words, unable to contain what they signify. The implications of the debate are real, Salzmänn noted: a dependence on external causes to effect grace pushes the sacramental participant outward, whereas an “expressionist semiotics” pulls the believer inward toward the “true self” and through that inner self to God. In reply to Cary, Salzmänn argued that Augustine’s anthropology helps us to understand a sacramental efficacy present in his thought apart from either the assertion that the sacraments “contain” grace or its negation in an “expressionist semiotics.” For Augustine, an interior psychological state precedes its external actualization through words and deeds; however, it is the external act itself which makes the inner will real, giving it existence and effectiveness in history. Thus, a sinful, proud will preceded the fall of Adam and Eve, but only the consumption of the forbidden fruit, as a sort of reverse sacrament, effected the consequences of shame and passion in human nature (*De civ. Dei* XIV, 12–13). Similarly, one may have interior goodwill toward another but only through the exchange of external signs can that goodwill become real in history, creating a new state of being in the communion of friendship (*Conf.* IV, 8.13). The same anthropological insight, Salzmänn noted, explains the efficacy of the sacraments of the New Law in Augustine: goodwill being present within the recipient, the exchange of sacramental signs creates the bond of love between participants by which the Church is constituted and the soul is healed. Augustine does not hold that the sacraments contain the grace they signify in the medieval sense promoted by Hugh of St. Victor and Peter Lombard, Salzmänn concluded; nevertheless, it cannot be said that for Augustine the sacraments are not essential in giving shape or even existence to the life of the Church, which is communion.

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