

The Confessions by Saint Augustine

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[Page numbers provided here correspond roughly to the hardback edition]

BOOK VIII: *Conversion*

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1, 1. In a spirit of thankfulness let me recall the mercies you lavished on me, O my God; to you let me confess them†1 May I be flooded with love for you until my very bones cry out, “Who is like you, O Lord?”†2 Let me offer you a sacrifice of praise, for you have snapped my bonds.†3 How you broke them I will relate, so that all your worshipers who hear my tale may exclaim, “Blessed be the Lord, blessed in heaven and on earth, for great and wonderful is his name.”†4

Your words were now firmly implanted in my heart of hearts, and I was besieged by you on every side.†5 Concerning your eternal life I was now quite certain, though I had but glimpsed it like a tantalizing reflection in a mirror;†6 this had been enough to take from me any lingering doubt concerning that imperishable substance from which every other substance derives its being. What I now longed for was not greater certainty about you, but a more steadfast abiding in you. In my daily life everything seemed to be teetering, and my heart needed to be cleansed of the old leaven.†7 I was attracted to the Way, which is our Savior himself, but the narrowness of the path daunted me and I still could not walk in it.†8

You inspired in me the idea that I ought to go to Simplicianus, and even I could see the sense of this. I regarded him as your good servant, a man from whom grace radiated.†9 Moreover I had heard how from his youth he had lived for you in complete dedication, and since he was an old man by now I assumed that after following your way of life for long years and with such noble zeal he must be rich in experience and deeply learned. And so indeed he was. I hoped, therefore, that if I could discuss my perplexities with him he would bring out from his storehouse†10 appropriate advice as to how a man in my condition might walk in your way.

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2. Surveying the full assembly of the Church I observed that people's lifestyles varied. For my own part I was irked by the secular business I was conducting, for no longer was I fired by ambition, and prepared on that account to endure such heavy servitude in the hope of reputation and wealth, as had formerly been the case. Those prospects held no charm for me now that I was in love with your tender kindness and the beauty of your house;†11 but I was in tight bondage to a woman. The apostle did not forbid me to marry, although he did propose a better choice, earnestly wishing that everyone might live as he did himself;†12 but I was too weak for that and inclined to an easier course. For this reason alone I was vacillating, bored and listless amid my shriveled cares because I was forced to adapt myself to other aspects of conjugal life to

which I had pledged and constrained myself, though they were little to my liking. From the lips of your Truth I had heard that *there are eunuchs who have castrated themselves for love of the kingdom of heaven*, but the saying continues, *Let anyone accept this who can.*^{†13}

How foolish are they who know not God! So many good things before their eyes, yet *Him Who Is* they fail to see.^{†14} I was trapped in that foolishness no longer, for I had left it behind by hearkening to the concerted witness of your whole creation, and had discovered you, our creator, and your Word, who dwells with you and is with you the one sole God, through whom you have created all things.^{†15} But there are impious people of another type, who do recognize God yet have not glorified him as God, nor given him thanks.^{†16} Into that error too I had formerly blundered, but your right hand grasped me,^{†17} plucked me out of it and put me in a place where I could be healed, for you have told us that *reverence for God—that is wisdom*,^{†18} and warned us, *Do not give yourself airs for wisdom*, because *those who believed themselves wise have sunk into folly*.^{†19} I had found a precious pearl, worth buying at the cost of all I had;^{†20} but I went on hesitating.

Conversation with Simplicianus

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2, 3. Accordingly I made my way to Simplicianus. When Ambrose, then bishop, had been baptized, Simplicianus had stood as father to him, and Ambrose regarded him with affection as a father indeed. To him I described the winding paths of my wayward life. When I mentioned that I had read certain Platonist books, translated into Latin by Victorinus, who had formerly been a rhetorician in Rome but had, as I had heard, died a Christian, Simplicianus told me how fortunate I was not to have stumbled on the writings of other philosophers, works full of fallacies and dishonesty that smacked of the principles of this world,^{†21} whereas those Platonist writings conveyed in every possible way, albeit indirectly, the truth of God and his Word.

Story of Victorinus' conversion

He went on to reminisce about this Victorinus^{†22} with the object of inculcating in me that humility of Christ which is hidden from the sagacious but revealed to little ones.^{†23} He knew him intimately in Rome, and he told me a story about Victorinus which I will not pass over in silence, since it powerfully redounds to the praise of your grace and moves me to confession, this story of a deeply learned old man.

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Thoroughly conversant with all the liberal arts, Victorinus had also read widely and with discrimination in philosophy and had taught many a noble senator; in recognition of his distinction as a teacher a statue had been erected to him in the Roman forum, which was a very high honor in the eyes of worldly people, and one he well deserved. Until this period of his life he had been a worshiper of idols and shared the abominable

superstitions which at that time blew like an ill wind through almost the whole of the Roman nobility, who were agog for Pelusium†24 and for

Anubis, dog-voiced god, and monstrous deities
of many a hue, who warred in days gone by
against Minerva, Neptune, Venus....†25

These gods Rome had once vanquished, but now worshiped, and the elderly Victorinus with his terrible thunders had habitually defended their cults; yet he was not ashamed to become a child of your Christ and be born as an infant from your font, bending his neck to the yoke of humility†26 and accepting on his docile brow the sign of the ignominious cross.†27

4. O Lord, Lord, who bade your heavens stoop, who touched the mountains and set them smoking,†28 by what means did you make your hidden way into that man's breast? The story as Simplicianus told it to me was this. Victorinus was in the habit of reading holy scripture and intensively studying all the Christian writings, which he subjected to close scrutiny; and he would say to Simplicianus, not openly but in private, intimate conversation, "I am already a Christian, you know." But the other always replied, "I will not believe that, nor count you among Christians, until I see you in Christ's Church." Victorinus would chaff him: "It's the walls that make Christians, then?" He would often talk like this, claiming that he was a Christian. Simplicianus often responded in the same way, and Victorinus would frequently repeat his joke about walls.

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The fact was that he was sorely afraid of upsetting the proud demon-worshippers who were his friends, fearing that the weight of their resentment might come storming down on him from the peak of their Babylonian grandeur,†29 as though from lofty cedars on Lebanon not yet felled by the Lord.†30 But later he drank in courage from his avid reading and came to fear that he might be disowned by Christ before his holy angels if he feared to confess him before men and women.†31 In his own eyes he was guilty of a great crime in being ashamed of the holy mysteries instituted by your humble Word, while feeling no shame at the sacrilegious rites of proud demons, whose likeness he had been proud to assume himself. Accordingly he threw off the shamefacedness provoked by vanity and became modest in the face of truth: suddenly and without warning he said to Simplicianus, who told this tale, "Let us go to church: I want to become a Christian."

Hardly able to contain his joy, Simplicianus went with him. He was initiated into the first stage of the catechumenate,†32 and not long afterward he gave in his name, asking for rebirth in baptism.†33 Rome stood amazed, while the Church was jubilant. The proud looked on and fumed with anger; they ground their teeth in impotent fury;†34 but as for your servant, the Lord God was his hope, and he had no eyes for vanities or lying follies.†35

5. Eventually the time came for him to make his profession of faith. Custom decrees that those who are approaching your grace in baptism make their profession in the presence of the baptized community of Rome, standing on a raised platform and using a set form of

words which has been entrusted to them and committed to memory.†36 Simplicianus told me that Victorinus had been offered by the priests the option of making his statement more privately, for it was customary to offer this concession to people who were likely to lose their nerve through shyness, but that he had chosen rather to proclaim his salvation before the holy company. What he taught in rhetoric was not salvation, he said, yet he had professed that publicly enough. If he was not afraid to address crowds of crazy people in his own words, how much less ought he to fear your peaceable flock as he uttered your word?

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As he climbed up to repeat the Creed they all shouted his name to one another in a clamorous outburst of thanksgiving—everyone who knew him, that is; and was there anyone present who did not? Then in more subdued tones the word passed from joyful mouth to joyful mouth among them all: “Victorinus, Victorinus!” Spontaneous was their shout of delight as they saw him, and spontaneous their attentive silence to hear him. With magnificent confidence he proclaimed the true faith, and all the people longed to clasp him tenderly to their hearts. And so they did, by loving him and rejoicing with him, for those affections were like clasping hands.

3, 6. O God, who are so good, what is it in the human heart that makes us rejoice more intensely over the salvation of a soul which is despaired of but then freed from grave danger, than we would if there had always been good prospects for it and its peril slighter? You too, merciful Father, yes, even you are more joyful over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.†37 And we likewise listen with overflowing gladness when we hear how the shepherd carries back on exultant shoulders the sheep that had strayed,†38 and how the coin is returned to your treasury as neighbors share the glee of the woman who found it,†39 while the joy of your eucharistic assembly wrings tears from us when the story is read in your house of a younger son who *was dead, but has come back to life, was lost but is found.*†40 You express your own joy through ours, and through the joy of your angels who are made holy by their holy charity; for you yourself are ever the same,†41 and all transient things, things which cannot abide constantly in their mode of being, are known to your unchanging intelligence.

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7. What is going on in our minds, then, that we should be more highly delighted at finding cherished objects, or having them restored to us, than if we had always kept them safe? Other instances bear this out, and all our experience shouts its corroboration, “Yes, truly this is so.” A victorious emperor celebrates his triumph. He would not have been victorious had there been no war, and the more imperiled he has been in battle, the more elated he is in his triumph. Or a storm batters mariners and threatens them with shipwreck. Every face pales at the prospect of death,†42 but sky and sea grow calm, and the sailors' joy is as intense as lately was their fear. Or someone we love falls sick. His pulse betrays the gravity of his condition, and all who long for his recovery are equally tormented in their minds. Then he takes a turn for the better, and although he is not yet walking with his pristine vigor there is already such joy as never there was when in

earlier days he strode about well and strong.

Even the natural pleasures of human life are attained through distress, not only through the unexpected calamities that befall against our will but also through deliberate and planned discomfort. There is no pleasure in eating and drinking unless the discomfort of hunger and thirst have preceded them. Drunkards eat somewhat salty food to induce a searing, parched sensation, which will be deliciously quenched by a drink. Then again, custom requires that after betrothal brides shall not be handed over immediately, lest after marriage a man hold cheap the woman for whom he did not as a bridegroom have to sigh and wait.

8. This law holds for shameful, demeaning pleasure, but the same is true for what is permitted and lawful, the same for the most sincere and honorable friendship, and the same for that young man who had died but come back to life, had perished but was found. In every case greater sorrow issues in greater joy. How can this be, O Lord my God, when you are yourself your own eternal joy, and all around you heaven rejoices in you eternally? Why is it that our part of creation swings between decay and growth, pain and reconciliation? Perhaps because this is the proper mode of being for these things and with this alone you endowed them when from highest heaven to the lowest places of the earth, from the dawn of the ages to their end, from angel to tiny worm, from the first stirring of change to the last, you assigned all classes of good things and all your righteous works to their appropriate places, and activated them at their proper times?

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Ah, how high you are in the heights of heaven,†43 how deep in the depths! From no place are you absent, yet how tardily do we return to you!

4, 9. Come, Lord, arouse us and call us back, kindle us and seize us, prove to us how sweet you are in your burning tenderness; let us love you and run to you.†44 Are there not many who return to you from a deeper, blinder pit than did Victorinus, many who draw near to you and are illumined†45 as they welcome the light, and in welcoming it receive from you the power to become children of God?†46 Yet if they are less well known to the populace, even people who do know them find less joy in their conversion, because whenever joy is shared among many, even the gladness of individuals is increased, for all are affected by the common enthusiasm and they catch the flame from one another. Moreover, the fact that these converts are generally known ensures that they become for many an authoritative example pointing toward salvation; they forge ahead of crowds that will follow. That is why many who have made the journey before them rejoice particularly, with an eye to others besides these lone individuals.

Forbid it, Lord, that rich personages should ever be more welcome in your tabernacle than the poor, or the nobility than lowly folk,†47 when your own preferential choice fell upon the weak things of this world in order to shame the strong, upon lowly things, contemptible things and nonentities, as though they really were, to set at nought the things that are.†48 Nevertheless the least of your apostles,†49 through whose tongue you sent those words re-echoing, loved to be called not by his former name, “Saul,” but “Paul,” to commemorate that glorious victory when the proconsul Paulus,†50 his pride

beaten down†51 by the apostle's arms, was brought under Christ's lenient yoke to become a common subject of the great King.†52 The enemy is more thoroughly trounced in a person over whom he had a more powerful hold, or through whom he had a hold over a greater number of others; and stronger is his grip over those who on pretext of nobility are proud, stronger too his hold over many another on pretext of their authority.

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The higher, then, the value set on the soul of Victorinus, which the devil had captured as an impregnable stronghold, and on Victorinus' tongue, which the devil had wielded like a huge, sharp weapon to destroy many, the greater was the gladness with which your children rightly rejoiced on seeing the powerful foe bound by our King†53 and his weaponry seized, cleaned, and made fit to serve in your honor as equipment useful to the Master for every good purpose. †54

Augustine longs to imitate him, but is hindered by lustful habit

5, 10. On hearing this story I was fired to imitate Victorinus; indeed it was to this end that your servant Simplicianus had related it. But he added a further point. When in the reign of the Emperor Julian a law was passed which forbade Christians to teach literature and rhetoric, Victorinus willingly complied, for he preferred to abandon his school of talkativeness rather than forsake your word, through which you impart eloquence to the tongues of speechless babes.†55 In my eyes he appeared not so much heroic as all the happier for having taken this step, since it afforded him the opportunity to be at leisure for you. I ached for a like chance myself, for it was no iron chain imposed by anyone else that fettered me, but the iron of my own will. The enemy had my power of willing in his clutches, and from it had forged a chain to bind me. The truth is that disordered lust springs from a perverted will; when lust is pandered to, a habit is formed; when habit is not checked, it hardens into compulsion. These were like interlinking rings forming what I have described as a chain, and my harsh servitude used it to keep me under duress.

A new will had begun to emerge in me, the will to worship you disinterestedly†56 and enjoy you, O God, our only sure felicity; but it was not yet capable of surmounting that earlier will strengthened by inveterate custom. And so the two wills fought it out—the old and the new,†57 the one carnal, the other spiritual—and in their struggle tore my soul apart.

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11. I thus came to understand from my own experience what I had read, how the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit strives against the flesh.†58 I was aligned with both, but more with the desires I approved in myself than with those I frowned upon, for in these latter I was not really the agent, since for the most part I was enduring them against my will rather than acting freely.†59 All the same, the force of habit that fought against me had grown fiercer by my own doing, because I had come willingly to this point where I now wished not to be. And who has any right to object, when just punishment catches up with a sinner?

I had grown used to pretending that the only reason why I had not yet turned my back on the world to serve you was that my perception of the truth was uncertain, but that excuse was no longer available to me, for by now it was certain. But I was still entangled by the earth and refused to enlist in your service,†60 for the prospect of being freed from all these encumbrances frightened me as much as the encumbrances themselves ought to have done.

12. I was thus weighed down by the pleasant burden of the world in the way one commonly is by sleep, and the thoughts with which I attempted to meditate upon you†61 were like the efforts of people who are trying to wake up, but are overpowered and immersed once more in slumberous deeps. No one wants to be asleep all the time, and it is generally agreed among sensible people that being awake is a better state, yet it often happens that a person puts off the moment when he must shake himself out of sleep because his limbs are heavy with a lassitude that pulls him toward the more attractive alternative, even though he is already trying to resist it and the hour for rising has come; in a similar way I was quite sure that surrendering myself to your love would be better than succumbing to my lust, but while the former course commended itself and was beginning to conquer, the latter charmed and chained me. I had no answer to give as you said to me, *Arise, sleeper, rise from the dead: Christ will enlighten you,*†62 and plied me with evidence that you spoke truly; no, I was convinced by the truth and had no answer whatever except the sluggish, drowsy words, “Just a minute,” “One more minute,” “Let me have a little longer.” But these “minutes” never diminished, and my “little longer” lasted inordinately long.

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To find my delight in your law as far as my inmost self was concerned was of no profit to me when a different law in my bodily members was warring against the law of my mind, imprisoning me under the law of sin which held sway in my lower self. For the law of sin is that brute force of habit whereby the mind is dragged along and held fast against its will, and deservedly so because it slipped into the habit willingly. In my wretched state, who was there to free me from this death-doomed body, save your grace through Jesus Christ our Lord?†63

Conversation with Ponticianus

6, 13. Now I will relate how you set me free from a craving for sexual gratification which fettered me like a tight-drawn chain, and from my enslavement to worldly affairs: I will confess to your name, O Lord,†64 my helper and redeemer.

I continued to attend to my accustomed duties, but with mounting anxiety. I longed for you every day and spent as much time in your church as could be spared from my business, under the weight of which I was groaning. With me was Alypius, who since his third stint as assessor†65 had been without legal advisory work, and was now looking round for clients to whom he might once more sell his counsel, just as I was trying to sell the art of speaking, insofar as it ever can be imparted by teaching. Nebridius, however, yielding to our friendly persuasion, had consented to act as assistant teacher to

Verecundus, a citizen and schoolmaster of Milan who was very well known to us all. This man had most earnestly desired reliable help from someone of our company, for he stood in sore need of it, and he had reinforced his insistent plea by appealing to his close association with us. Nebridius was not, therefore, attracted to this post by ambition for the advantages it might bring him, for he could have done better by the profession of literature, had he willed; he undertook it simply as a kindly service because, being such a very gentle and accommodating friend, he was unwilling to set our request aside. He carried out his duties with the utmost discretion, taking care not to attract the attention of persons whom the world regarded as important. He thus steered clear of any mental disturbance they might have caused him, for he wanted to keep his mind free and disengaged for as much of his time as he possibly could, with a view to research and to reading or listening to anything connected with wisdom.

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14. On a certain day when Nebridius was absent (I forget why), something happened. A man named Ponticianus, who held an important post at court, came to our house to visit Alypius and me; being an African he was our compatriot, and he wanted something or other from us. We sat down together and talked. His eye happened to light upon a book that lay on a gaming table nearby;†66 he picked it up, opened it and found it to be the letters of the apostle Paul. This was certainly unexpected, for he had supposed it to be the kind of thing I exhausted myself in teaching. But then he smiled, looked up at me and offered his congratulations, surprised by his sudden discovery that those writings, and those alone, were under my eye. He was himself a baptized Christian and made a practice of prostrating himself in church before you, our God, in frequent and prolonged prayers. When I remarked that I was applying myself to intensive study of those scriptures, he began to tell us about the monk Antony of Egypt, whose name was illustrious and held in high honor among your servants, though we had never heard it until this moment.†67 When Ponticianus learned this he dwelt more fully on the subject, enlightening us about the great man; he was astonished at our ignorance. But we were stupefied as we listened to the tale of the wonders you had worked within the true faith of the Catholic Church, especially as they were most firmly attested by recent memory and had occurred so near to our own times. So all of us were amazed: we because they were so tremendous, and he because we had never heard of them.

15. His discourse led on from this topic to the proliferation of monasteries, the sweet fragrance rising up to you from the lives of monks, and the fecund wastelands of the desert. We had known nothing of all this.†68 There was even a monastery full of good brothers at Milan, outside the city walls, under Ambrose's care, yet we were unaware of it.

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Story of conversion of two court officials at Trier

Ponticianus went on talking and developing the theme, while we listened, spellbound. So it came about that he told us that one day when the court was at Trier†69

he and three of his colleagues went out for a walk in the gardens abutting on the walls,^{†70} while the emperor was occupied with the morning show at the circus. Now it happened that as they strolled about they split into pairs, one companion staying with Ponticianus while the other two went off by themselves. In their wandering these latter chanced upon a cottage where some servants of yours were living, men poor in spirit, the kind of people to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs.^{†71} There they found a book which contained *The Life of Antony*.^{†72} One of them began to read it. His admiration and enthusiasm were aroused, and as he read he began to mull over the possibility of appropriating the same kind of life for himself, by renouncing his secular career to serve you alone. (He belonged to the ranks of so-called administrative officers.^{†73}) Then quite suddenly he was filled with a love of holiness and a realistic sense of shame and disgust with himself;^{†74} he turned his gaze toward his friend and demanded, “Tell me: where do we hope all our efforts are going to get us? What are we looking for? In whose cause are we striving? Does life at court promise us anything better than promotion to being Friends of the Emperor?^{†75} And once we are, will that not be a precarious position, fraught with perils? Will it not mean negotiating many a hazard, only to end in greater danger still? And how long would it take us to get there? Whereas I can become a friend of God^{†76} here and now if I want to.”

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Even as he spoke he was in labor with the new life that was struggling to birth within him. He directed his eyes back to the page, and as he read a change began to occur in that hidden place within him where you alone can see; his mind was being stripped of the world, as presently became apparent. The flood-tide of his heart leapt on, and at last he broke off his reading with a groan as he discerned the right course and determined to take it. By now he belonged to you. “I have already torn myself away from the ambitions we cherished, and have made up my mind to serve God,” he told his friend. “I am going to set about it this very moment and in this place. If you have no stomach to imitate me, at least don't stand in my way.” The other replied that he would bear him company, both in the noble reward and in the glorious combat. And both of them, now enlisted in your service, began to build their tower, knowing the cost full well: they abandoned all their possessions and followed you.^{†77}

Meanwhile Ponticianus was walking with his companion through other parts of the garden. In search of their friends they arrived at the place, and on finding them there urged them to return, for it was growing late. They, however, told their story, announcing the plan on which they had resolved and describing how the will to take this course had arisen within them and grown firm; and they begged their friends at least to place no obstacles in their way, if they had no mind to join them. Ponticianus and his companion shed tears on their own account, as he related, even though they were in no way altered from the men they had been. They offered devout congratulations to their friends and commended themselves to their prayers; then they went back to the palace, dragging heavy hearts along the ground, while their friends stayed in the cottage with hearts set on heaven. Both were engaged to be married, and when their fiancées later heard of their decision, they likewise dedicated their virginity to you.

7, 16. Ponticianus went on with his story; but, Lord, even while he spoke you were wrenching me back toward myself, and pulling me round from that standpoint behind my back†78 which I had taken to avoid looking at myself. You set me down before my face,†79 forcing me to mark how despicable I was, how misshapen and begrimed, filthy and festering. I saw and shuddered. If I tried to turn my gaze away, he went on relentlessly telling his tale, and you set me before myself once more, thrusting me into my sight that I might perceive my sin and hate it.†80 I had been aware of it all along, but I had been glossing over it, suppressing it and forgetting.

17. But now self-aborrence possessed me, all the harsher as my heart went out more ardently to those young men, and I heard of the blessed impulsiveness with which they had without reserve handed themselves over to you for healing. By contrast with them I felt myself loathsome, remembering how many of my years—twelve, perhaps—had gone to waste, and I with them, since my nineteenth year when I was aroused to pursue wisdom by the reading of Cicero's *Hortensius*.†81 I had been putting off the moment when by spurning earthly happiness I would clear space in my life to search for wisdom; yet even to seek it, let alone find it, would have been more rewarding than discovery of treasure or possession of all this world's kingdoms, or having every bodily pleasure at my beck and call. I had been extremely miserable in adolescence, miserable from its very onset, and as I prayed to you for the gift of chastity I had even pleaded, “Grant me chastity and self-control, but please not yet.” I was afraid that you might hear me immediately and heal me forthwith of the morbid lust which I was more anxious to satisfy than to snuff out. So I had wandered off into the crooked paths†82 of a sacrilegious superstition, not because I had any certainty about it but because I preferred it to other beliefs—not that I was investigating these in any spirit of reverence: rather was I opposing them with malicious intent.

18. I had been telling myself that my reason for putting off day after day†83 the decision to renounce worldly ambition and follow you alone was that I could as yet see no certain light by which to steer my course. But the day had dawned when I was stripped naked in my own eyes and my conscience challenged me within: “Where is your ready tongue now? You have been professing yourself reluctant to throw off your load of illusion because truth was uncertain. Well, it is certain now, yet the burden still weighs you down, while other people are given wings on freer shoulders,†84 people who have not worn themselves out with research, nor spent a decade and more reflecting on these questions.”

My conscience gnawed away at me in this fashion, and I was fiercely shamed and flung into hideous confusion while Ponticianus was relating all this. Having brought the conversation to a close and settled his business with us, he returned to his place, and I to myself.

Was anything left unsaid in my inner debate? Was there any whip of sage advice I

left unused to lash my soul into coming with me, as I tried to follow you? It fought and resisted, but could find no excuse. All its arguments had been used up and refuted, but there remained a dumb dread: frightful as death seemed the restraining of habit's oozy discharge, that very seepage which was rotting it to death.

Struggle in the garden

8, 19. Within the house of my spirit the violent conflict raged on, the quarrel with my soul that I had so powerfully provoked in our secret dwelling, my heart,†85 and at the height of it I rushed to Alypius with my mental anguish plain upon my face. “What is happening to us?” I exclaimed. “What does this mean? What did you make of it? The untaught are rising up and taking heaven by storm,†86 while we with all our dreary teachings are still groveling in this world of flesh and blood!†87 Are we ashamed to follow, just because they have taken the lead, yet not ashamed of lacking the courage even to follow?” Some such words as these I spoke, and then my frenzy tore me away from him, while he regarded me in silent bewilderment. Unusual, certainly, was my speech, but my brow, cheeks and eyes, my flushed countenance and the cadences of my voice expressed my mind more fully than the words I uttered.

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Adjacent to our lodgings was a small garden. We were free to make use of it as well as of the house, for our host, who owned the house, did not live there. The tumult in my breast had swept me away to this place, where no one would interfere with the blazing dispute I had engaged in with myself until it should be resolved. What the outcome would be you knew, not I. All I knew was that I was going mad, but for the sake of my sanity, and dying that I might live, aware of the evil that I was but unaware of the good I was soon to become. So I went out into the garden and Alypius followed at my heels; my privacy was not infringed by his presence, and, in any case, how could he abandon me in that state? We sat down as far as possible from the house. I was groaning in spirit†88 and shaken by violent anger because I could form no resolve to enter into a covenant with you, though in my bones I knew that this was what I ought to do,†89 and everything in me lauded such a course to the skies. It was a journey not to be undertaken by ship or carriage or on foot,†90 nor need it take me even that short distance I had walked from the house to the place where we were sitting; for to travel—and more, to reach journey's end—was nothing else but to want to go there, but to want it valiantly and with all my heart, not to whirl and toss this way and that a will half crippled by the struggle, as part of it rose up to walk while part sank down.

20. While this vacillation was at its most intense many of my bodily gestures were of the kind that people sometimes want to perform but cannot, either because the requisite limbs are missing, or because they are bound and restricted, or paralyzed through illness, or in some other way impeded. If I tore out my hair, battered my forehead, entwined my fingers and clasped them round my knee, I did so because I wanted to. I might have wanted to but found myself unable, if my limbs had not been mobile enough to obey. So then, there were plenty of actions that I performed where willing was not the same thing as being able; yet I was not doing the one thing that was incomparably more desirable to me, the thing that I would be able to do as soon as I willed, because as soon as I willed—

why, then, I would be willing it! For in this sole instance the faculty to act and the will to act precisely coincide, and the willing is already the doing. Yet this was not happening. My body was more ready to obey the slightest whim of my soul in the matter of moving my limbs, than the soul was to obey its own command in carrying out this major volition, which was to be accomplished within the will alone.

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9, 21. How did this bizarre situation arise, how develop? May your mercy shed light on my inquiry, so that perhaps an answer may be found in the mysterious punishments meted out to humankind, those utterly baffling pains that afflict the children of Adam. How then did this bizarre situation arise, how develop? The mind commands the body and is instantly obeyed; the mind commands itself, and meets with resistance. When the mind orders the hand to move, so smooth is the compliance that command can scarcely be distinguished from execution; yet the mind is mind, while the hand is body. When the mind issues its command that the mind itself should will something (and the mind so commanded is no other than itself), it fails to do so. How did this bizarre situation arise, how develop? As I say, the mind commands itself to will something: it would not be giving the order if it did not want this thing; yet it does not do what it commands.

Evidently, then, it does not want this thing with the whole of itself, and therefore the command does not proceed from an undivided mind. Inasmuch as it issues the command, it does will it, but inasmuch as the command is not carried out, it does not will it. What the will is ordering is that a certain volition should exist, and this volition is not some alien thing, but its very self. Hence it cannot be giving the order with its whole self. It cannot be identical with that thing which it is commanding to come into existence, for if it were whole and entire it would not command itself to be, since it would be already.

This partial willing and partial non-willing is thus not so bizarre, but a sickness of the mind, which cannot rise with its whole self on the wings of truth because it is heavily burdened by habit. There are two wills, then, and neither is the whole: what one has the other lacks.

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10, 22. Some there are who on perceiving two wills engaged in deliberation assert that in us there are two natures, one good, the other evil, each with a mind of its own.†91 Let them perish from your presence, O God,†92 as perish all who talk wildly and lead our minds astray.†93 They are evil themselves as long as they hold these opinions, yet these same people will be good if they embrace true opinions and assent to true teaching, and so merit the apostle's commendation, *You were darkness once, but now you are light in the Lord.*†94 The trouble is that they want to be light not in the Lord but in themselves, with their notion that the soul is by nature divine, and so they have become denser darkness still, because by their appalling arrogance they have moved further away from you, the true Light, who enlighten everyone who comes into the world.†95 I warn these people, Take stock of what you are saying, and let it shame you; but once draw near to him and be illumined, and your faces will not blush with shame.†96

When I was making up my mind to serve the Lord my God†97 at last, as I had long since purposed, I was the one who wanted to follow that course, and I was the one who wanted not to. I was the only one involved. I neither wanted it wholeheartedly nor turned from it wholeheartedly. I was at odds with myself, and fragmenting myself. This disintegration was occurring without my consent, but what it indicated was not the presence in me of a mind belonging to some alien nature but the punishment undergone by my own. In this sense, and this sense only, it was not I who brought it about, but the sin that dwelt within me†98 as penalty for that other sin committed with greater freedom;†99 for I was a son of Adam.

23. Moreover, if we were to take the number of conflicting urges to signify the number of natures present in us, we should have to assume that there are not two, but many. If someone is trying to make up his mind whether to go to a Manichean conventicle or to the theater, the Manichees declare, “There you are, there's the evidence for two natures: the good one is dragging him our way, the bad one is pulling him back in the other direction. How else explain this dithering between contradictory wills?” But I regard both as bad, the one that leads him to them and the one that lures him back to the theater. They, on the contrary, think that an inclination toward them can only be good.

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But consider this: suppose one of our people is deliberating, and as two desires clash he is undecided whether to go to the theater or to our church, will not our opponents too be undecided what attitude to take? Either they will have to admit that it is good will that leads a person to our church, just as good as that which leads to theirs the people who are initiated into their sacred rites and trapped there—and this they are unwilling to admit; or they will conclude that two evil natures and two bad minds are pitted against each other within one person, in which case their habitual assertion of one good and one evil nature will be erroneous; or, finally, they will be brought round to the truth and no longer deny that when a person is deliberating there is but one soul, thrown into turmoil by divergent impulses.

24. When, therefore, they observe two conflicting impulses within one person, let them stop saying that two hostile minds are at war, one good, the other evil, and that these derive from two hostile substances and two hostile principles. For you are true, O God, and so you chide and rebuke them and prove them wrong. The choice may lie between two impulses that are both evil, as when a person is debating whether to murder someone with poison or a dagger; whether to annex this part of another man's property or that, assuming he cannot get both; whether to buy himself pleasure by extravagant spending or hoard his money out of avarice; whether to go to the circus or the theater if both performances are on the same day—and I would even add a third possibility: whether to go and steal from someone else's house while he has the chance, and a fourth as well: whether to commit adultery while he is about it. All these impulses may occur together, at exactly the same time, and all be equally tempting, but they cannot all be acted upon at once. The mind is then rent apart by the plethora of desirable objects as four inclinations, or even more, do battle among themselves; yet the Manichees do not claim that there are as many disparate substances in us as this.

The same holds true for good impulses. I would put these questions to them: Is it good to find delight in a reading from the apostle? To enjoy the serenity of a psalm? To discuss the gospel? To each point they will reply, "Yes, that is good." Where does that leave us? If all these things tug at our will with equal force, and all together at the same time, will not these divergent inclinations put a great strain on the human heart, as we deliberate which to select? All are good, but they compete among themselves until one is chosen, to which the will, hitherto distracted between many options, may move as a united whole. So too when the joys of eternity call us from above, and pleasure in temporal prosperity holds us fast below, our one soul is in no state to embrace either with its entire will. Claimed by truth for the one, to the other clamped by custom, the soul is torn apart in its distress.

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11, 25. Such was the sickness in which I agonized, blaming myself more sharply than ever, turning and twisting in my chain^{†100} as I strove to tear free from it completely, for slender indeed was the bond that still held me. But hold me it did. In my secret heart you stood by me, Lord, redoubling the lashes of fear and shame in the severity of your mercy, lest I give up the struggle and that slender, fragile bond that remained be not broken after all, but thicken again and constrict me more tightly. "Let it be now," I was saying to myself. "Now is the moment, let it be now," and merely by saying this I was moving toward the decision. I would almost achieve it, but then fall just short; yet I did not slip right down to my starting-point, but stood aside to get my breath back. Then I would make a fresh attempt, and now I was almost there, almost there... I was touching the goal, grasping it... and then I was not there, not touching, not grasping it. I shrank from dying to death and living to life, for ingrained evil was more powerful in me than new-grafted good. The nearer it came, that moment when I would be changed, the more it pierced me with terror. Dismayed, but not quite dislodged, I was left hanging.

26. The frivolity of frivolous aims, the futility of futile pursuits,^{†101} these things that had been my cronies of long standing,^{†102} still held me back, plucking softly at my garment of flesh and murmuring in my ear, "Do you mean to get rid of us? Shall we never be your companions again after that moment... never... never again? From that time onward so-and-so will be forbidden to you, all your life long." And what was it that they were reminding me of by those words, "so-and-so," O my God, what were they bringing to my mind? May your mercy banish such memories far from me! What foul deeds were they not hinting at, what disgraceful exploits! But now their voices were less than half as loud, for they no longer confronted me directly to argue their case, but muttered behind my back and slyly tweaked me as I walked away, trying to make me look back. Yet they did slow me down, for I could not bring myself to tear free and shake them off and leap across to that place whither I was summoned, while aggressive habit still taunted me: "Do you imagine you will be able to live without these things?"

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27. The taunts had begun to sound much less persuasive, however; for a revelation was coming to me from that country toward which I was facing, but into which I trembled to cross. There I beheld the chaste, dignified figure of Continen- ce. Calm and

cheerful was her manner, though modest,†103 pure and honorable her charm as she coaxed me to come and hesitate no longer, stretching kindly hands to welcome and embrace me, hands filled with a wealth of heartening examples. A multitude of boys and girls were there, a great concourse of youth and persons of every age, venerable widows and women grown old in their virginity, and in all of them I saw that this same Continnence was by no means sterile, but the fruitful mother of children†104 conceived in joy from you, her Bridegroom. She was smiling at me, but with a challenging smile, as though to say, “Can you not do what these men have done, these women? Could any of them achieve it by their own strength, without the Lord their God? He it was, the Lord their God, who granted me to them. Why try to stand by yourself, only to lose your footing? Cast yourself on him and do not be afraid: he will not step back and let you fall. Cast yourself upon him trustfully; he will support and heal you.” And I was bitterly ashamed, because I could still hear the murmurs of those frivolities, and I was still in suspense, still hanging back. Again she appealed to me, as though urging, “Close your ears against those unclean parts of you which belong to the earth†105 and let them be put to death. They tell you titillating tales, but have nothing to do with the law of the Lord your God.”†106

All this argument in my heart raged only between myself and myself. Alypius stood fast at my side, silently awaiting the outcome of my unprecedented agitation.

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12, 28. But as this deep meditation dredged all my wretchedness up from the secret profundity of my being and heaped it all together before the eyes of my heart, a huge storm blew up within me and brought on a heavy rain of tears. In order to pour them out unchecked with the sobs that accompanied them I arose and left Alypius, for solitude seemed to me more suitable for the business of weeping. I withdrew far enough to ensure that his presence—even his—would not be burdensome to me. This was my need, and he understood it, for I think I had risen to my feet and blurted out something, my voice already choked with tears. He accordingly remained, in stunned amazement, at the place where we had been sitting. I flung myself down somehow under a fig-tree†107 and gave free rein to the tears that burst from my eyes like rivers, as an acceptable sacrifice to you.†108 Many things I had to say to you, and the gist of them, though not the precise words, was: “O Lord, how long?†109 How long? Will you be angry for ever? Do not remember our age-old sins.”†110 For by these I was conscious of being held prisoner. I uttered cries of misery: “Why must I go on saying, 'Tomorrow... tomorrow'?†111 Why not now? Why not put an end to my depravity this very hour?”

“Pick it up and read”

29. I went on talking like this and weeping in the intense bitterness of my broken heart.†112 Suddenly I heard a voice from a house nearby—perhaps a voice of some boy or girl, I do not know—singing over and over again, “Pick it up and read, pick it up and read.” My expression immediately altered and I began to think hard whether children ordinarily repeated a ditty like this in any sort of game, but I could not recall ever having heard it anywhere else. I stemmed the flood of tears and rose to my feet, believing that

this could be nothing other than a divine command to open the Book and read the first passage I chanced upon; for I had heard the story of how Antony had been instructed by a gospel text. He happened to arrive while the gospel was being read, and took the words to be addressed to himself when he heard, *Go and sell all you possess and give the money to the poor: you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.*†113 So he was promptly converted to you by this plainly divine message. Stung into action, I returned to the place where Alypius was sitting, for on leaving it I had put down there the book of the apostle's letters. I snatched it up, opened it and read in silence the passage on which my eyes first lighted: *Not in dissipation and drunkenness, nor in debauchery and lewdness, nor in arguing and jealousy; but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh or the gratification of your desires.*†114 I had no wish to read further, nor was there need. No sooner had I reached the end of the verse than the light of certainty flooded my heart and all dark shades of doubt fled away

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30. I closed the book, marking the place with a finger between the leaves or by some other means, and told Alypius what had happened. My face was peaceful now. He in return told me what had been happening to him without my knowledge. He asked to see what I had read: I showed him, but he looked further than my reading had taken me. I did not know what followed, but the next verse was, *Make room for the person who is weak in faith.*†115 He referred this text to himself and interpreted it to me. Confirmed by this admonition he associated himself with my decision and good purpose without any upheaval or delay, for it was entirely in harmony with his own moral character, which for a long time now had been far, far better than mine.

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We went indoors and told my mother, who was overjoyed. When we related to her how it had happened she was filled with triumphant delight and blessed you, who have power to do more than we ask or understand,†116 for she saw that you had granted her much more in my regard than she had been wont to beg of you in her wretched, tearful groaning. Many years earlier you had shown her a vision of me standing on the rule of faith;†117 and now indeed I stood there, no longer seeking a wife or entertaining any worldly hope, for you had converted me to yourself. In so doing you had also converted her grief into a joy†118 far more abundant than she had desired, and much more tender and chaste than she could ever have looked to find in grandchildren from my flesh.

FOOTNOTES

- †1. See Ps 85(86):13; Is 63:7.
- †2. See Ps 34(35):10.
- †3. See Ps 115(116):16-17.
- †4. See Pss 134(135):6; 75:2(76:1); 8:2(1).
- †5. See Is 29:2.
- †6. See 1 Cor 13:12.
- †7. See 1 Cor 5:7-8.
- †8. See Mt 7:14.
- †9. Theological mentor for many years to Ambrose and later to Augustine, Simplicianus in spite of his advanced age succeeded Ambrose as bishop of Milan in 397.
- †10. See Mt 13:52.
- †11. See Ps 25(26):8.
- †12. See 1 Cor 7:7-8, where Paul discusses marriage and celibacy within the Christian calling, an issue which is becoming crucial for Augustine.
- †13. Mt 19:12.
- †14. See Wis 13:1.
- †15. See Jn 1:1-3.
- †16. See Rom 1:21.
- †17. See Ps 117:36(118:35).
- †18. Jb 28:28.
- †19. Prv 26:5; Rom 1:22.
- †20. See Mt 13:46; 19:21.
- †21. See Col 2:8.
- †22. Gaius Marius Victorinus Afer, thought to have been born c. 281-291, a highly cultured author and later a theologian. The parallel between this philosophically-inclined rhetorician hesitating on the threshold of the Church, and the young Augustine, must have been evident to Simplicianus.
- †23. See Mt 11:25.
- †24. A city in Egypt. The text is corrupt here and conjectures abound, but the context suggests an Eastern or Egyptian deity. The Romans had deserted their traditional gods in favor of those of the conquered peoples.
- †25. Virgil, *Aen.* 8.698-700.
- †26. See Sir 51:34; Jer 27:12; Mt 11:29.
- †27. See Gal 5:11.
- †28. See Ps 143(144):5.
- †29. For Babylon as a symbol of pride, see Is 14:4.12.13; and, identified with pagan Rome, Rv 17:5; 18:2.
- †30. See Ps 28(29):5
- †31. See Mk 8:38 and par.
- †32. This comprised exorcism, the signing of the catechumen's forehead with the cross, the laying on of hands and the giving of salt. In this first stage they were *audientes*, hearers during the liturgy of the word.
- †33. The giving in of one's name, usually at the beginning of Lent, marked the transition to the second stage, that of the *competentes*, during which intensive instruction and the entrusting of the Lord's Prayer and the Creed to the catechumens prepared them for baptism at Easter.
- †34. See Ps 111(112):10.
- †35. See Ps 39:5(40:4).
- †36. This is the *redditio symboli*, the "handing back" of the words of the Creed they had been taught. The "discipline of secrecy," still in force in the mid-fourth century, forbade them to write it down.
- †37. See Lk 15:4-7.
- †38. See Lk 15:4-6; Ps 118(119):176.
- †39. See Lk 15:8-9.
- †40. Lk 15:24.32.
- †41. See Ps 101:28 (102:27).

†42. See Virgil, *Aen.* 4.644.

†43. See Ps 112(113):4-5; Is 33:5.

†44. See Sg 1:2-3.

†45. See Ps 33:6(34:5)

†46. See Jn 1:9,12.

†47. See Dt 1:17; 16:19; Sir 42:1; Acts 10:34; Jas 2:1-9.

†48. See 1 Cor 1:27-28; Rom 4:17.

†49. See 1 Cor 15:9.

†50. See Acts 13:7-12.

†51. See Virgil, *Aen.* 6.853.

†52. *Provincialis* originally meant a civilian as opposed to a soldier. Augustine uses it elsewhere to mean a “layperson” as distinct from a monk or cleric. Here the point is that from being a great man in the imperial system Sergius Paulus became an obscure private citizen in Christ's kingdom.

†53. See Mt 12:29.

†54. See 2 Tm 2:21.

†55. See Wis 10:21.

†56. See Jb 1:9 (Old Latin).

†57. See Eph 4:22.24; Col 3:9-10.

†58. See Gal 5:17.

†59. See Rom 7:16-17.

†60. See 2 Tm 2:4

†61. See Ps 62:7(63:6), a psalm of early-morning imagery, like this paragraph.

†62. Eph 5:14.

†63. See Rom 7:24-25.

†64. See Ps 53:8(54:6).

†65. See VI, 10, 16.

†66. The juxtaposition of these two objects, representing respectively Augustine's future and his past, may be intended to heighten the dramatic effect.

†67. Antony of Egypt, c. 250-356, called “the father of monks.”

†68. Though monasticism was already flourishing in Egypt and Cappadocia, there were few monasteries in Africa before Augustine's time, which may account for his ignorance.

†69. Trier had been the capital of the Western Empire since Diocletian's time, but the court removed thence to Milan in 381. Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria had been in exile at Trier from 335 to 337; some lingering memory of him may explain the following episode.

†70. The setting of this scene in a garden anticipates the experience of Augustine and Alypius in another garden, soon to be related; the parallel is reinforced by many verbal similarities.

†71. See Mt 5:3.

†72. Attributed to Athanasius and translated into Latin by Jerome's friend Evagrius.

†73. These were inspectors in the imperial bureaucracy, sometimes used like secret police or intelligence agents, but more often in communications.

†74. See Ps 4:5(4).

†75. People of senatorial or equestrian rank who formed the emperor's entourage and acted as advisors.

†76. See Jas 2:23; Jdt 8:22.

†77. See Lk 14:28; Mt 19:27; Lk 5:11,28.

†78. See Jer 2:27.

†79. See Ps 49(50):21.

†80. See Ps 35:3(36:2).

†81. See III, 4, 7. We are now in 386; the following scene occurs in August.

†82. See Sir 2:16.

†83. See Sir 5:8.

†84. See Ps 54:7(55:6).

†85. See Mt 6:6.

†86. See Mt 11:12.

†87. See 1 Cor 15:50; Mt 16:17; Gal 1:16.

†88. See Jn 11:33.

†89. See Ps 34(35):10.

†90. See I, 18, 28.

†91. Throughout this chapter he attacks Manichean views.

†92. See Ps 67:3(68:2).

†93. See Ti 1:10.

†94. Eph 5:8.

†95. See Jn 1:9.

†96. See Ps 33:6(34:5).

†97. See Dt 6:13; Mt 4:10; Jer 30:9.

†98. See Rom 7:17, 20.

†99. That is, by Adam. Augustine uses the comparative to suggest a relative freedom enjoyed by Adam, superior to our own but short of perfect freedom. He was to spell out the distinction later in *Correction and Grace* XII, 33 between *posse non peccare* (the ability not to sin, Adam's privilege), and *non posse peccare* (the perfection of freedom in heaven).

†100. A possible echo of Persius' Fifth Satire (5.127), from which he quotes in the following chapter.

†101. See Eccl 1:2; 12:8.

†102. *Antiquae amicae meae*: not former female friends, as translators have sometimes taken it. This is the beginning of the personification he uses to make the struggle vivid; see "Continentia" in VIII, 11, 27.

†103. Compare the cheerful young man in III, 11, 19.

†104. See Ps 112(113):9.

†105. See Col 3:5; the unquoted part of the context lists the relevant vices.

†106. See Ps 118(119):85.

†107. Did he really note the species? It is more likely that he calls it a fig-tree for the sake of the symbolism: in Gn 3:7 Adam and Eve in the newly-discovered shame of their sin use fig-leaves to make loincloths; in Mt 21:19 (= Mk 11:13-14) Jesus curses a sterile fig-tree, which withers away. Hence the fig-tree can stand for the sinful, carnal condition condemned to die. But in Jn 1:47-48 Jesus sees Nathanael under a fig-tree, and calls him thence to grace and ultimate vision.

†108. See Ps 50:19(51:17).

†109. See Ps 6:4(3).

†110. See Ps 78(79):5, 8.

†111. This seems to be an allusion to Persius 5.66-69, but the Latin sound, *Cras, cras*, resembled the raucous cry of a crow, as Augustine remarks in his *Expositions of the Psalms* 102. 16; see *Sermon* 224.4.4.

†112. See Ps 50:19(51:17).

†113. Mt 19:21; see Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 2.

†114. Rom 13:13-14. Since Book VII the central issue for Augustine has been acceptance of Christ; this now crystallizes into the "putting on" of Christ in baptism, sacramentally symbolized by clothing in the new robe.

†115. Rom 14:1.

†116. See Eph 3:10.

†117. See III, 11, 19.

†118. See Ps 29:12(30:11).