

## Augustine's Theology of Baptism in Light of Ecumenism<sup>1</sup>

Julia Cheung

摘要：本文主要引用了奧思定三篇談及聖洗的著作——《論聖洗》、《罪的懲罰和寬恕與嬰兒領洗》及《基督的恩寵和原罪》——去看奧思定的聖洗神學。文章闡述了奧思定對聖經中有關聖洗的章節的詮釋及從而得出的神學理論，包括關於聖洗的性質、效果、必需

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is developed from a 20-minute speech delivered by the author on 13th March 2016. It was an open lecture themed “Baptizing Them (Mt 28:19),” organised by the “Theological Dialogue Group,” a joint taskforce of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Ecumenical Commission and the Hong Kong Christian Council. The author speaks with reference to the Catholic perspective; the other four speakers included representatives from the Orthodox Church and three Protestant denominations. The author wishes to thank the organizers and participants of the ecumenical talk, and sincerely hopes that Christians may indeed be “one body in Christ” (Rom 12:5).

性、及要獲得果效的條件。文章在梵蒂岡第二屆大公會議《大公主義》法令中所提到「對於那些藉聖洗聖事而得重生的人，即因此在他們中間形成聖事性的合一的聯繫」（UR 22）的背景下去細看奧思定反對重洗的論述。作為一位受到各方基督徒尊重、其聖洗神學亦深深影響了天主教訓導的教父，奧思定恰好是基督徒在合一交談中的一棟橋樑。

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he said to his apostles, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19). This Trinitarian formula in Jesus’ mandate has since then become the fundamental formula of Christian baptism. Despite all the factors in various schisms that later separate Christians from each other, our common baptism is what gives us the ground as well as hope in our ecumenical efforts today. Indeed, the one baptism in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is what marks us as Christians, whether we are Catholics or Christians of other faith traditions.

Augustine is a Church Father that all Christians greatly respect. As an extremely influential Latin Church Father, his theology can be said to have shaped the doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. (He is by far the most cited ecclesiastical writer in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, quoted more than 80 times.) As a renowned theologian of the late fourth and early fifth century before the 1054 schism, he does

not fail to be respected by Orthodox Christians as well. And given the influence Augustine has on Reformers like Martin Luther, Augustine is also honoured by Christians from the churches of the Reformation as a remarkable theologian. In dialoguing with other Christians, it is often more useful to emphasize our common denominators rather than focus on the differences. An examination of Augustine’s theology of baptism would be a good starting point for reaffirming the bond of brotherhood between all Christians—a brotherhood that is based on our brotherhood in Christ, nourished by our common patristic theological sources, and expressed still today and everywhere in our common baptism in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

## I) What is Baptism

It is the attestation of Vatican II’s Decree on Ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964) that baptism is the bond of unity between all Christians:

Whenever the sacrament of baptism is duly administered as our Lord instituted it, and is received with the right dispositions, a person is truly incorporated into the crucified and glorified Christ, and reborn into a sharing of divine life... Thus baptism establishes a sacramental bond of unity existing among all who have been reborn by it. But of itself baptism is only a beginning, an inauguration wholly directed towards the acquisition of fullness of life in Christ.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Unitatis Redintegratio* 22, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), p. 919.

### a) Baptism is burial with Christ (Rom 6:3)

What exactly is this baptism? In *The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Charity*, Augustine claims, “baptism in Christ is nothing other than an image of the death of Christ, and that the death of Christ on the cross is nothing other than an image of the forgiveness of sins, so that just as he suffered a true death, in us there is a true forgiveness of sins, and just as his resurrection was true, so also is our justification true.”<sup>3</sup> This is Augustine’s interpretation of Paul’s rhetorical question in Rom 6:3: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” While baptism is baptism into the death of Christ, it links the life, death and resurrection of Christians to that of Christ. Through baptism, Christians join the sheepfold of Christ in a new and justified life. Augustine’s Easter sermon (*Sermon 229A*) stresses much this aspect of rebirth. “I told you, what I don’t think you have forgotten, that baptism had, or has, the same value as being buried with Christ, as the apostle says: *For we have been buried with Christ through baptism into death, so that just as he has risen from the dead, so we too may walk in newness of life* (Rom 6:4).”<sup>4</sup>

It should be noted that importance is not only given to the aspect of rebirth, but more significantly, to the personage that the baptized

would from thence be attached to—the personage of Christ. Ultimately, this baptism is the baptism of Christ. In Augustine’s polemic against the Donatists, he unequivocally stresses that even if one is baptized by the schismatics, that baptism would still be Christ’s baptism. In *On Baptism*, he shrewdly uses the Donatist practice of not rebaptizing their own schismatics as an example to testify to the fact that what makes a baptism valid is not the church in which it is performed but the indelible character of belonging to Christ that it confers.

There is no point at issue between ourselves and those Donatists who hold communion with Primianus, which could give rise to any doubt that the baptism of Christ may not only be retained, but even conferred by those who are severed from the Church. For as they themselves are obliged to confess that those whom Felicianus baptized in schism received true baptism, inasmuch as they now acknowledge them as members of their own body, with no other baptism than that which they received in schism; so we say that that is Christ’s baptism, even without the pale of Catholic communion, which they confer who are cut off from that communion, inasmuch as they had not lost it when they were cut off.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *encl.* 14, 52, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (hereafter referred to as WSA), I/8, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. Bruce Harbert (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2005), pp. 303-304. Cf. William Harmless, “Baptism,” in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), p. 88.

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *s.* 229A, 1, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, III/6, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1993), p. 269. Cf. William Harmless, “Baptism,” p. 88.

<sup>5</sup> Augustine, *bapt.* 1, 5, 7, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (hereafter referred to as NPNF), I/4, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J. R. King (reprint, Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), p. 415. Cf. “Incorporated into Christ by Baptism, the person baptized is configured to Christ. Baptism seals the Christian with the indelible spiritual mark (*character*) of his belonging to Christ. No sin can erase this mark, even if sin prevents Baptism from bearing the fruits of salvation.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter referred to as CCC) 1272, (Chicago, IL: Loyola University Press, 1994).

Augustine stresses that “that is Christ’s baptism, even without the pale of Catholic communion.” In other words, baptism in the Catholic Church or in any church is nothing less than the baptism of Christ. It is Christ who gives validity to all baptisms, and holds all the baptized together in him. The Catholic Church today echoes what Augustine says more than a millennium ago. “Baptism constitutes the foundation of communion among all Christians, including those who are not yet in full communion with the Catholic Church.”<sup>6</sup> It is in the same ecumenical spirit of *Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964) that the *Catechism* (1994) gives this statement, which affirms the essential bond between all Christians despite the lack of full communion.

The language used by Augustine to defend the validity of all Christian baptisms is in fact much stronger than that used in the *Catechism*. He would go as far as to declare overtly to the Donatists that a baptism is valid even if it is conferred outside the Church. “For it is the Church that gives birth to all, either within her pale, of her own womb; or beyond it, of the seed of her bridegroom.”<sup>7</sup> The Bishop of Hippo is concerned about the schismatic Donatists, who would see the Donatist church as the only true Church and thus deem it necessary to rebaptize Catholic converts to Donatism. Augustine’s more immediate concern would thus be defending the integrity of the sacrament of baptism rather than providing a definition for what the true Church is or where it lies. In a letter to his rival bishop, Macrobius the Donatist of Hippo, Augustine argues that Macrobius should not be rebaptizing

Catholics who had gone over to the Donatists, for repeating the baptism of Christ would actually imply subjecting Christ to exsufflation.<sup>8</sup>

The baptism of Christ, which was given to the Church in order that we might partake of eternal salvation, should not be judged foreign to the Church when it is conferred outside the Church and should not be regarded as belonging to others when others have it. Rather, in those outside the Church and separated from the Church it contributes to their destruction, but in those who belong to her and her own it produces salvation.<sup>9</sup>

Whether one is baptized in the Catholic Church or the Donatist church does not affect the validity of the baptism but only its efficacy. Therefore, a baptism would only be conducive to a person’s salvation if it is conferred in the one Church, of which Christ is the head.

Furthermore, by baptism, a person is immersed into Christ, regardless of who the minister of the rite is. Augustine states that “in the question of baptism we have to consider, not who gives, but what he gives; not who receives, but what he receives.”<sup>10</sup> Augustine stretches this notion of *ex opere operato* to its extreme, declaring that “even at the hands of murderers... It is God, therefore, that gives the Holy

<sup>6</sup> CCC 1271.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *bapt.* I, 15, 23: NPNF I/4, p. 421.

<sup>8</sup> “Would Christ of whom it was said, *This is the one who baptizes* (Jn 1:33), be subjected to exsufflation in his own baptism...?” Augustine, *ep.* 108, 1, 3, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, II/2, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. Roland Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), p. 69.

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *ep.* 108, 6, 16: WSA II/2, p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *bapt.* IV, 10, 17: NPNF I/4, p. 454.

Spirit even when a man of this kind is baptizing.”<sup>11</sup> Here, Augustine does not seem to really intend to refer to murderers in the criminal sense but is using the word in the context of 1 Jn 3:15, which says, “Any one who hates his brother is a murderer.”<sup>12</sup> Still, the point that each and every baptism bears the mark of Christ is brought home most eloquently in this way. Hence, “if anyone, receiving it at the hands of a misguided man, yet does not receive the perversity of the minister, but only the holiness of the mystery,... he receives remission of his sins.”<sup>13</sup> In light of Augustine's theology of baptism, it does not come as a surprise that the Catholic Church today recognizes a baptism performed “even by a non-baptized person,” based on the scriptural claim regarding God's desire for all men to be saved (1 Tim 2:4).<sup>14</sup> The phenomenon that nowadays many Christian churches would also recognize baptisms conferred in Christian faith traditions other than their own shows that many Christians do commendably and rightly see baptism as an immersion into Christ rather than baptism into some particular Christian faith tradition.

### b) Baptism is a bath in the word (Jn 15:3)

The fruit of baptism is the remission of sins. In *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 80, Augustine explains that this remission results not

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *bapt.* V, 20, 28; NPNF I/4, p. 473.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Augustine, *bapt.* V, 19, 27; NPNF I/4, p. 473.

<sup>13</sup> Augustine, *bapt.* IV, 12, 19; NPNF I/4, p. 455.

<sup>14</sup> “In case of necessity, anyone, even a non-baptized person, with the required intention, can baptize, by using the Trinitarian baptismal formula. The Church finds the reason for this possibility in the universal saving will of God and the necessity of Baptism for salvation.” CCC 1256.

from the water used in the baptism *per se* but from the word added to the water. “You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you” (Jn 15:3). For Augustine, this verse illustrates that baptism is a sacrament, a visible sign of invisible grace. “Why does He not say, Ye are clean through the baptism wherewith ye have been washed...? Take away the word, and the water is neither more nor less than water. The word is added to the element, and there results the Sacrament.”<sup>15</sup> (This definition offered by Augustine is in fact cited in the *Catechism*.<sup>16</sup>) Augustine defines sacraments as “sacred and evident signs of hidden realities”<sup>17</sup> in *The Grace of Christ and Original Sin*, with particular reference to the baptism of infants for the forgiveness of original sin. The word that Jesus has spoken is the outward sign of the inward reality of Christ being the Word. “Hence, Baptism is a bath of water in which the ‘imperishable seed’ of the Word of God produces its life-giving effect.”<sup>18</sup>

## II) Effects of Baptism

This life-giving effect allows the baptized to become members of the body of Christ. The *Catechism* (1994) cites the *Roman Catechism* II, 2, 5 to explain this point. “Through Baptism we are freed from

<sup>15</sup> Augustine, *Io. eu. tr.* 80, 3, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, V/7, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. John Gibb and James Innes (reprint, Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), p. 344. Cf. William Harmless, “Baptism,” p. 86.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. CCC 1228.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *gr. et pecc. or.* II, 39, 45, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, I/23, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Roland J. Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997), p. 443.

<sup>18</sup> CCC 1228.



sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: 'Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word.'<sup>19</sup> The footnote to this article of the *Catechism* makes reference to the Council of Florence's *Bull of union with the Armenians* (1439), which states that "through [baptism] we become members of Christ and of the body of the church,"<sup>20</sup> a statement that Norman Tanner, an expert on the Church councils, deems as giving "support for considering both the Orthodox and Protestant as belonging to the one church with Roman Catholics."<sup>21</sup> This conviction that baptism binds all Christians together as members of the body of Christ, stated in the *Catechism* (1994) and implied in the *Bull of union with the Armenians* (1439), is actually first saliently asserted in Scripture and well-discussed by Augustine, the most renowned Latin Church Father.

#### a) Baptism effects the forgiveness of sins (Tit 3:5)

In *Sermon* 213, at the rite of handing the Creed over to advanced catechumens, Augustine preaches about the forgiveness of sins effected by baptism as expounded in our rule of faith. "If the forgiveness of sins were not to be had in the Church, there would be no hope of a future life and eternal liberation. We thank God, who gave his Church such a gift...

you will be renewed in the *bath of rebirth*."<sup>22</sup> The Bishop of Hippo gives the hopeful message to the catechumens at this *traditio symboli*, that upon their baptism, their sins will be washed away and they shall be renewed. The reference to the *bath of rebirth* (Tit 3:5) suggests that the effect of baptism is twofold—"the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit" (Tit 3:5).<sup>23</sup> The same twofold effect of removing what is bad and receiving what is good is also stated in the Acts of the Apostles. "And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:38). Paul's letter to Titus further claims that our baptism has the benefit that "we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life" (Tit 3:7). In *The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins and the Baptism of the Little Ones*, Augustine, too, maintains that forgiveness of sins is God's grace, for "the baptized are reborn through the grace of God."<sup>24</sup>

Nevertheless, Augustine notes that despite the forgiveness of sins by baptism through grace, in a world that is fallen, concupiscence would always remain. "The law of concupiscence... remains in the members, but... its guilt is removed... in one who has received the sacrament of rebirth and has begun to be renewed."<sup>25</sup> Thus, even after

<sup>19</sup> CCC 1213.

<sup>20</sup> Council of Florence, *Bull of union with the Armenians*, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, p. 542.

<sup>21</sup> Norman P. Tanner, *The Councils of the Church: A Short History* (New York: Herder and Herder, 2001), pp. 73-74.

<sup>22</sup> Augustine, s. 213, 9, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, III/6, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1993), p. 145. Cf. William Harmless, "Baptism," p. 88.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. "Immersion in water symbolizes not only death and purification, but also regeneration and renewal. Thus the two principal effects [of Baptism] are purification from sins and new birth in the Holy Spirit." CCC 1262.

<sup>24</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* II, 28, 45: WSA I/23, p. 106.

<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* II, 28, 45: WSA I/23, p. 107.

baptism, one is still susceptible to sin, and praying for the forgiveness of sins is thus necessary and important. "Concupiscence, then, remains in the members of this death as the law of sin... For this reason, when the Lord was teaching us to pray, he advised us to say... *Forgive us our debts, as we also forgive our debtors.*"<sup>26</sup> Baptism does not eliminate our need to battle further with sin, but it gives us the grace to combat it. "The bond of guilt is broken by which the devil held the soul through that concupiscence... Yet, it continues on in the battle in which we chastise our body and subject it to servitude."<sup>27</sup>

#### b) Salvation in Christ's community (1 Cor 15:21-22)

The forgiveness of sins—and the strife against further sinning—is to be effected within the Church, which is the body of Christ. Augustine asserts that "no one can attain eternal life and salvation apart from the community with Christ, which we have in him and with him, when we receive his sacraments and are made members of his body."<sup>28</sup> Baptism is incorporation into the body of Christ.<sup>29</sup> It is in this context of the *totus Christus* that Augustine interprets 1 Cor 15:21-22: "For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." Since salvation is attained in Christ, it is important that even little ones who cannot fend for themselves ought to be baptized so that they would

<sup>26</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* II, 4, 4: WSA I/23, p. 80.

<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* I, 39, 70: WSA I/23, p. 75.

<sup>28</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* I, 11, 19: WSA I/23, p. 128.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. "Baptism makes us members of the Body of Christ... Baptism incorporates us into the Church." CCC 1267.

belong to this *totus Christus*. Though they are too young to commit any conscious sins of their own, they are not exempted from original sin. "Little ones should be baptized, because... washed by the sacrament and love of the faithful and thus incorporated into Christ's body, which is the Church, they might be reconciled to God."<sup>30</sup> Today, each Christian faith tradition would claim that there is the hope of salvation for those who belong to their community. Augustine also claims that there is remission of sins and hope for eternal life in the Church community to which he belongs. For him, this one Church can only be and is specifically the Catholic Church. Yet, membership in this Church is not exclusive to certain selected few; it ideally includes all of humanity, for this Church is the universal Church that spans the entire world.

### III) Necessity of Baptism

The promise of baptism is eternal life with Christ, for "sound faith and sound doctrine have held that no one of those who have come to Christ through baptism has ever been excluded from the grace of the forgiveness of sins and that no one can possess eternal salvation apart from his kingdom."<sup>31</sup> This grace of the forgiveness of sins through baptism would not have been necessary if men have not sinned. But the reality is that all men—little ones included—are subjected to original sin.

<sup>30</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* I, 26, 39: WSA I/23, p. 56. Cf. "Nothing else is accomplished by the baptism of little ones but that they are incorporated into the Church, that is, that they are joined to the body and members of Christ." Augustine, *pecc. mer.* III, 4, 7: WSA I/23, p. 120.

<sup>31</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* I, 28, 55: WSA I/23, p. 64.

### a) Original sin inherited by all (Rom 5:12, 14, 16)

What is this original sin that even innocent little ones are not exempted from? It is a sin inherited by all of humanity. Scripture tells us that “as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned” (Rom 5:12). Augustine interprets that it means the sin is spread to all men “by propagation, not by imitation; otherwise, [Paul] would say, ‘Through the devil.’”<sup>32</sup> Thus, even little ones who are not yet able to imitate the evil deeds of adults have inevitably inherited this sin by their very birth as humans. Scripture further says that “death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam” (Rom 5:14). According to Augustine, this means that “from the first man right up to the law which God promulgated, ... even the law could not remove the reign of death... In any human being this reign of death was destroyed only by the grace of the savior.”<sup>33</sup> That is to say, the sin of Adam could not be removed if one is not immersed in the grace of Christ, and baptism is exactly such an immersion. Scripture then says that “the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification” (Rom 5:16). Augustine points out that the stress on the “one trespass” in this verse testifies to the existence of the one original sin. “If there is no original sin, would it not be true... that judgement leads [human beings] to condemnation from many sins?”<sup>34</sup> The “one trespass” that needs the

<sup>32</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* I, 9, 10: WSA I/23, p. 39.

<sup>33</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* I, 11, 13: WSA I/23, p. 40.

<sup>34</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* I, 12, 15: WSA I/23, p. 41.

free gift of the saving grace of Christ is the sin that originates from Adam.

### b) The necessity of infant baptism

Just by being part of the human race, all men—little ones not excluded—are subject to the original sin of Adam. The only way to be saved from the damnation of that sin is an immersion into Christ. Hence, baptism is necessary for salvation, and this is true even for little ones. Augustine asserts that the Catholic Church “truthfully baptizes little ones for the forgiveness of sins, not sins that they commit through imitation on account of the example of the first sinner, but sins which they contracted through birth on account of the defect at the origin.”<sup>35</sup> Augustine is sure that little ones who are weak both in mind and body are incapable of committing any personal sins.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, he proclaims in a language that is not only strong but also sounds harsh to modern ears, that “unbaptized little ones not only cannot enter the kingdom of God, but cannot possess eternal life apart from the body of Christ,”<sup>37</sup> though he thinks that “the little ones who leave the body without baptism will be under the mildest condemnation of all.”<sup>38</sup> Regarding

<sup>35</sup> Augustine, *gr. et pecc. or.* II, 16, 17: WSA I/23, p. 427. Cf. William Harmless, “Baptism,” p. 89.

<sup>36</sup> “Look at their great weakness of mind and body, their ignorance of everything, their complete inability to obey a command, their inability to understand or observe any law... Does not all this proclaim and demonstrate their freedom from personal sin with a silence that bears stronger witness than any language of ours?” Augustine, *pecc. mer.* I, 36, 65: WSA I/23, p. 71. Cf. William Harmless, “Baptism,” p. 89.

<sup>37</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* III, 4, 8: WSA I/23, p. 121.

<sup>38</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* I, 16, 21: WSA I/23, p. 44. Cf. William Harmless, “Baptism,” p. 89.



these unbaptized children, the Catholic Church today adopts a broader-minded understanding of the necessity of baptism for salvation based on God's desire that all men be saved (1 Tim 2:4) as well as Jesus' command to welcome children who come to him (Mk 10:14).<sup>39</sup>

Augustine maintains that even the children of the baptized need to be baptized, against the Pelagian claim that "those who have been born of two baptized parents ought to be free from [original] sin."<sup>40</sup> Given that original sin is spread by propagation, its harmful effect to an individual could only be removed by the baptism of that particular individual. This is because being born again is not the same as being born.

The guilt of that defect... will remain in the carnal offspring of those who have been born again, until it has been washed away in them by the bath of rebirth. Those who have been born again do not produce children of the flesh who have been born again, but ones that have been born. And thus they pass on to them, not the result of being born again, but of being born.<sup>41</sup>

Augustine argues that both baptism and the Old Testament rite of circumcision are performed only once, so if circumcision is required for each individual, the same should be true for baptism. "Just as during the

<sup>39</sup> "As regards children who have died without Baptism, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved, and Jesus' tenderness toward children which caused him to say: 'Let the children come to me, do not hinder them,' allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism." CCC 1261.

<sup>40</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* III, 8, 15: WSA I/23, p. 125.

<sup>41</sup> Augustine, *gr. et pecc. or.* II, 39, 45: WSA I/23, p. 443.

time of that sacrament one begotten of a circumcised parent had to be circumcised, so now one who is begotten of a baptized parent has to be baptized."<sup>42</sup> The suggestion of the Pelagians that children of baptized parents are free from original sin therefore holds no ground. "Since it bothers them that a sin which is washed away in baptism is present in those whom the baptized parents generate, how do they themselves explain that the foreskin that is removed by circumcision is present in those whom circumcised parents generate?"<sup>43</sup>

After all, infant baptism points to the essentiality of Christ's salvific role, for no one—not even little ones—is immune from original sin. The very responses parents make on behalf of little ones during the rite of infant baptism suggests the presence of original sin even in the little ones. "How, then, are they going to say that the child renounces the devil, if the devil had no claim on the child?... How are they going to say that, among other things, the child believes in the forgiveness of sins, if the child receives no forgiveness?"<sup>44</sup> William Harmless, in his entry for "Baptism" in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, uses Augustine's *Sermon 174* to argue that the Bishop of Hippo's insistence on the necessity of infant baptism ultimately reflects his Christological viewpoint. "The deeper issue, as [Augustine] saw it, was Christological. What deeply offended him in Pelagian claims about infant sinlessness was that such claims implicitly denied that Jesus had saved infants, for if they were truly sinless, then there would be

<sup>42</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* II, 25, 40: WSA I/23, p. 104.

<sup>43</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* III, 8, 16: WSA I/23, pp. 125-126.

<sup>44</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* I, 34, 63: WSA I/23, p. 70.

nothing for him to save them from (s. 174.7)."<sup>45</sup> The Catholic Church today, like Augustine, recognizes the importance of infant baptism. She perceives infant baptism as an "immemorial tradition of the Church."<sup>46</sup>

### c) The necessity of the sacrament of rebirth (Jn 3:3, 5)

If baptism is needed even for little ones, it is needed for all. No level of piety or amount of good deeds could substitute for the necessity of baptism. Augustine uses Cornelius, the Roman centurion in the Acts of the Apostles, to illustrate his point. Cornelius was "a devout man who feared God with all his household, gave alms liberally to the people, and prayed constantly to God" (Acts 10:2). Augustine argues that "all the good that [Cornelius] had in his prayers and alms could not benefit him unless he were incorporated in the Church by the bond of Christian brotherhood and peace, and he was ordered to send to Peter, and through him learned Christ; and being also baptized by his orders, he was joined by the tie of communion to the fellowship of Christians."<sup>47</sup> Even the good and devout Cornelius needed baptism in order to be reborn in

<sup>45</sup> William Harmless, "Baptism," p. 90. Cf. "Those who say that infancy has nothing in it for Jesus to save, are denying that Christ is Jesus for all believing infants. Those, I repeat, who say that infancy has nothing in it for Jesus to save, are saying nothing else than that for believing infants, infants that is who have been baptized in Christ, Christ the Lord is not Jesus. After all, what is Jesus? Jesus means Savior. Jesus is the Savior." Augustine, s. 174, 7, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, III/5, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1992), p. 261.

<sup>46</sup> "The practice of infant Baptism is an immemorial tradition of the Church. There is explicit testimony to this practice from the second century on, and it is quite possible that, from the beginning of the apostolic preaching, when whole 'households' received baptism, infants may also have been baptized." CCC 1252.

<sup>47</sup> Augustine, *bapt.* I, 8, 10: NPNF I/4, p. 416.

Christ, without which he could not attain eternal life. "The sacrament of baptism is, of course, the sacrament of rebirth. If is necessary, then, that everyone who has been born must be reborn, because *unless one has been born again, one cannot see the kingdom of God* (Jn 3:3)."<sup>48</sup> Jesus himself further explains to Nicodemus that "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:5). The Catholic Church today proclaims the same necessity of baptism for salvation "for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament."<sup>49</sup>

In a way, this qualification that baptism is the necessary condition for salvation for those whose circumstances are favourable towards receiving it answers the question that Augustine himself has raised. If baptism is necessary for salvation, why is it true that some good people do not have the opportunity to be baptized yet some bad people get to receive baptism and thus earn eternal life in their very last moments?

Why does it happen that some who are from youth on quite modest, talented and temperate... live, nonetheless, in a place where the grace of Christ cannot be preached to them?... Yet other persons who are slow of wit, given to sexual desires, buried deep in crimes and wrongdoing, are so guided by providence that they hear the word, believe, and are baptized and then taken by death...?<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* II, 27, 43; WSA I/23, p. 105.

<sup>49</sup> CCC 1257.

<sup>50</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* I, 22, 31; WSA I/23, p. 50.

Augustine approaches this question with an appeal to Rom 11:33 on the inscrutability of God's ways. He also raises the possibility of two equal sinners and only one of them in the end gets baptized, the case of two innocent ones and only one of them gets baptized, and the situation of two baptized infants yet one of them turns out to live an evil life—it may seem that God is not fair if in each case the baptized gets to enjoy eternal life and the unbaptized is damned. “In each case we, of course, come back to that exclamation, *O the depth of the riches!* (Rom 11:33)... And yet there is no injustice in God... What is the source of this great diversity, if it is not that his judgements are inscrutable and his ways unsearchable.”<sup>51</sup> This response of Augustine, which anchors on the unfathomability of God's ways, is probably less than satisfactory for rationalists who fail to take any leap of faith. Yet, trusting in the mystery of God's ways is something that all Christians—not just Catholics—are called to do.

#### IV) Baptism and Faith

Baptism is only the beginning of a new life. Baptism is a sacrament, a mystery, but it is not a magic moment that causes sudden changes to the baptized person. The renewal experienced by the baptized would be gradual, and it would only be at the eschaton that his regeneration in Christ be complete.

<sup>51</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* I, 21, 30; WSA I/23, p. 50. Cf. “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom 11:33)

#### a) Faith needs to grow

Augustine stresses that transformation of the baptized in his new life in Christ is a gradual and “day to day” process.

Baptism only brings about the full and complete forgiveness of sins, but it does not immediately transform the whole condition of the human being. Rather, in those who are making good progress, as their renewal grows from day to day, the first fruits of the Spirit transform into themselves what pertains to the old flesh, until the whole is so renewed that even the weakness of the animal body attains spiritual strength and incorruption.<sup>52</sup>

In the vein of Augustine, the *Catechism* also deems that “for all the baptized, children or adults, faith must grow *after* Baptism... Baptism is the source of that new life in Christ from which the entire Christian life springs forth.”<sup>53</sup> It is thus a rite of initiation. The *italics* for the word “after” emphasizes that baptism is only the starting point of a life-long pilgrim journey. Augustine gives us hope that this lengthy and perhaps difficult journey is not endless.

Our adoption as God's children will become complete when our body is also redeemed... But because our salvation has not yet become a reality, we are not yet fully renewed and are not yet children of God, but are children of the world. We make progress, then, toward renewal and a righteous life

<sup>52</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* II, 27, 44; WSA I/23, p. 106.

<sup>53</sup> CCC 1254.

inasmuch as we are children of God, and in that respect we cannot sin at all.<sup>54</sup>

That men "cannot sin at all" at the eschaton is a more powerful grace given by Christ, the second Adam. In *Rebuke and Grace*, Augustine explains that the first man before his fall has the ability not to sin (*posse non peccare*), and that is the first grace. But after the fall of Adam, men is no longer able not to sin (*non posse non peccare*). Yet, men saved by Christ at the eschaton would actually be unable to sin (*non posse peccare*).<sup>55</sup> That is when men have reached their final destination, and are fully renewed or divinized.

#### b) Fruitfulness of baptism

On the one hand, the fruit of baptism is only fully realised at the eschaton. On the other hand, it is possible that a baptism yields no fruit at all. Augustine gives two conditions for the fruitfulness of baptism in his treatise *On Baptism*. First, it is fruitful only if there is true conversion, for "the sacrament of baptism is one thing, the conversion of heart another, but that man's salvation is made complete through the two together."<sup>56</sup> Second, it is fruitful only if it is conferred within the Church, for "men may indeed receive her baptism outside her pale,

<sup>54</sup> Augustine, *pecc. mer.* II, 8, 10: WSA I/23, p. 85.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. "For the first man was able not to sin; he was able not to die; he was able not to abandon the good... The first freedom of the will, then, was the inability not to sin; the final freedom will be much greater, namely, the inability to sin." Augustine, *corrupt.* 12, 33, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, 1:26 ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Roland J. Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1999), p. 132.

<sup>56</sup> Augustine, *bapt.* IV, 25, 33: NPNF I/4, p. 462.

but that no one outside can either receive or retain the salvation of eternal happiness... So, therefore, the baptism of the Church may exist outside, but the gift of the life of happiness is found alone within the Church."<sup>57</sup> In fact, Augustine views the conversion of heart and being within the Church as two related conditions. Baptism of those outside the Church "is of avail neither to themselves, nor to those who receive it from them, unless they are changed in heart with a true conversion, so that the sacrament itself... may begin to profit them."<sup>58</sup> While baptism outside the Church is valid, it could not be fruitful because a Christian conversion, which is a conversion towards Christ, could not be genuine if it happens outside the mystical body of Christ.

Writing against schismatic Donatists, whom Augustine considers as having disturbed the peace and destroyed the unity of the church in Africa, the Bishop of Hippo is convinced that there could be no true conversion in a baptism conferred outside the Catholic Church. He asserts that "just as baptism is of no profit to the man who renounces the world in words and not in deeds, so it is of no profit to him who is baptized in heresy or schism."<sup>59</sup> In other words, any baptism conferred outside the Church—and by that Augustine means the Catholic Church—is bound to be unfruitful. Today, in light of ecumenism, perhaps it would be better to put the emphasis on Augustine's other point, that baptism would be fruitful when there is an associated conversion of heart. As for Augustine's claim that baptism is fruitful only within the Church, a

<sup>57</sup> Augustine, *bapt.* IV, 1, 1: NPNF I/4, p. 447.

<sup>58</sup> Augustine, *bapt.* IV, 3, 5: NPNF I/4, p. 448.

<sup>59</sup> Augustine, *bapt.* IV, 4, 6: NPNF I/4, p. 448.

less exclusively Catholic view would be to emphasize the contributive role of ecclesiastical communities in nourishing and fostering faith. Augustine himself would agree that ultimately it is the sincerity in the conversion of heart towards Christ that really counts. After all, he himself is aware that salvation is not by itself guaranteed even if baptism is conferred within the Church, for "many fail to obtain this salvation even within the Church, although it is clear that they possess the sacrament, which is holy in itself."<sup>60</sup>

### c) God supplies the want

While Augustine recognizes the necessity of baptism for salvation, he as the shepherd of Hippo is sensitive to the practical constraints associated with receiving baptism under certain circumstances. In cases in which the sacramental form of baptism is lacking, Augustine believes that the merciful God would supply for what is lacking in human terms. He specifically mentions that unbaptized martyrs and those who have converted but had not the time and opportunity for baptism, as in the case of the good thief, would also attain salvation. "I find that not only martyrdom for the sake of Christ may supply what is wanting of baptism, but also faith and conversion of heart, if recourse may not be had to the celebration of the mystery of baptism for want of time... But the want is supplied invisibly only when the administration of baptism is prevented...by the necessity of the moment."<sup>61</sup> Like Augustine, the Catholic Church today trusts that both "*Baptism of blood*, like the

*desire for Baptism*, brings about the fruits of Baptism without being a sacrament."<sup>62</sup> Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) interprets the immersion in Christ necessary for attaining eternal life in its widest sense. It affirms the possibility of salvation for anyone with good will, seeing in their good will the fruit of a participation in the saving grace of Christ.

[The hope of attaining to the resurrection] applies not only to Christians but to all people of good will in whose hearts grace is secretly at work. Since Christ died for everyone, and since the ultimate calling of each of us comes from God and is therefore a universal one, we are obliged to hold that the holy Spirit offers everyone the possibility of sharing in this paschal mystery in a manner known to God.<sup>63</sup>

In contrast with *Gaudium et Spes*, one must admit that Augustine's theology of baptism does not go as far as to explicitly extend the possibility of salvation to anyone with good will. Still, he ought to be credited for maintaining that God would not only supply for the lack of the sacramental form of baptism, but would also supply for other deficiencies, like the lack of maturity needed for a genuine conversion of heart in the little ones. While baptism would not be fruitful without the conversion of heart, "the sacrament may exist in the infant without the conversion of the heart."<sup>64</sup> Like in the case of the good thief, in

<sup>60</sup> Augustine, *bapt.* IV, 14, 22: NPNF I/4, p. 456.

<sup>61</sup> Augustine, *bapt.* IV, 22, 30: NPNF I/4, p. 460.

<sup>62</sup> CCC 1258. Cf. "For catechumens who die before their Baptism, their explicit desire to receive it, together with repentance for their sins, and charity, assures them the salvation that they were not able to receive through the sacrament." CCC 1259.

<sup>63</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* 22, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, p. 1082.

<sup>64</sup> Augustine, *bapt.* IV, 25, 33: NPNF I/4, p. 462.



which baptism “had been missing not from pride or contempt, but from want of opportunity, so in infants who die baptized, we must believe that the same grace of the Almighty supplies the want... from insufficiency of age.”<sup>65</sup> In a broad sense, Augustine’s confidence that God would supply for whatever is lacking that is resulted “not from pride or contempt” is not at all inconsistent with the affirmation of the possibility of salvation for “all people of good will” in *Gaudium et Spes*.

## V) One Baptism

In *On Baptism*, Augustine’s main complaint against the Donatists is their practice of rebaptism on the pretext of following the tradition of Cyprian, the highly honoured saint of Carthage. But Augustine is a clear advocate that baptism should not be repeated. He uses Eph 4:4-6 to argue that if there was only one baptism when unity was lacking at the time of the apostles, so even though the Donatist schism implies that there is not one Church, there should still be only be one baptism.

It is handed down to us... that there is “one God, and one Christ, and one hope, and one faith, and one Church, and one baptism.” Since then we find that in the times of the apostles themselves there were some who had not the one hope, but had the one baptism, the truth is so brought down to us from the fountain itself, that it is clear to us that... they may yet have one baptism who have not the one Church.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Augustine, *bapt.* IV, 24, 32: NPNF I/4, p. 462.

<sup>66</sup> Augustine, *bapt.* V, 26, 37: NPNF I/4, p. 476. Cf. “There is one body and one Spirit,

Cyprian’s practice of rebaptizing those who had lapsed during the persecutions was based on two reasons. First, this was what his predecessor Agrippinus had done. Second, the Council of Carthage (256), which he summoned, decided in favour of rebaptism. Though rebaptism was not the practice in Italy and other regions then, Cyprian stressed the importance of unity and did not let this difference in opinion between him and the others become a cause of schism. Augustine defends Cyprian, claiming that had a later plenary council ruled against Cyprian’s view, the Bishop of Carthage would have complied with the decision given his great concern for unity. Even if Cyprian was wrong in his view about baptism, the charity he showed in his martyrdom had more than compensated for his mistake. For “if the fruitful branch still had something that needed pruning, it was pruned by the glorious sword of martyrdom, not because he was killed for the name of Christ, but because he was killed for the name of Christ in the bosom of unity.”<sup>67</sup> Having died “in the bosom of unity” is what differentiates the saint of Carthage from the Donatists.

The Catholic Church also clearly teaches against rebaptism. The Council of Trent’s Decree on the Sacraments *Canons on the sacrament of baptism* 11 anathematizes anyone who says that “if anyone has denied the faith of Christ among unbelievers, his true and rightly conferred baptism must be repeated when he has turned back to repentance.”<sup>68</sup>

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just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4-6).

<sup>67</sup> Augustine, *ep.* 108, 3, 10: WSA II/2, p. 74.

<sup>68</sup> Council of Trent, *First decree [On the sacraments]: Canons on the sacrament of*

The *Catechism* also teaches that baptism is “given once and for all” and thus “cannot be repeated,” due to the indelible mark it imprints on the Christian.<sup>69</sup> That baptism is an “indelible mark” is actually a very Augustinian concept. In Augustine’s letter to Boniface, the tribune of Africa, who asks him about Donatism, Augustine explains that baptism, like branding, is a mark that cannot be cancelled. If the sheep of the Lord have been led astray, both they and the offspring they derive from the outside should not be rebaptized when they return to the sheepfold of the Lord.

Does it not pertain to a shepherd’s care to call back to the Lord’s fold...? He ought especially to do so if the sheep have multiplied through fertility among runaway slaves and thieves, because it is more just that the Lord’s brand should be recognized on them which is not violated in those whom we receive back but still do not rebaptize. For in that way the error of the sheep is to be corrected without destroying on it the mark of the redeemer. For suppose someone receives the mark of the king from a deserter who bears that mark, and suppose they both receive pardon and the deserter returns to the army, and the other begins to be in the army, where he had not been before. The mark on neither of them is cancelled.<sup>70</sup>

baptism 11, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, p. 686.

<sup>69</sup> CCC 1272. Cf. “Baptism imprints on the soul an indelible spiritual sign, the character, which consecrates the baptized person for Christian worship. Because of the character Baptism cannot be repeated.” CCC 1280.

<sup>70</sup> Augustine, *ep.* 185, 6, 23, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, II/3, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. Roland Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2004), p. 193.

Baptism in a schismatic church does not justify rebaptism, just as a previously imperfect understanding of Catholic doctrine does not justify baptism anew.

For it is quite possible that a man may be possessed of the genuine sacrament and a corrupted faith, as it is possible that he may hold the words of the creed in their integrity, and yet entertain an erroneous belief about the Trinity, or the resurrection, or any other point... Is it then to be maintained that, if any one who has been baptized within the Catholic Church itself should afterwards... find out... that he had before believed otherwise than he ought, it is requisite that he should therefore be baptized afresh?<sup>71</sup>

Pushing such a scenario to the extreme, if a previously less than perfect understanding of the Trinity would justify rebaptism, then does it mean that Augustine, who even at the end of his masterpiece *The Trinity* admits that he has “not been capable of” fully understanding the mystery,<sup>72</sup> would need to be rebaptized every time he arrives at a better understanding? The ridiculousness of such a thought brings us back to the point professed by St. Paul, that there is but “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph 4:5).

<sup>71</sup> Augustine, *bapt.* III, 14, 19: NPNF I/4, p. 441.

<sup>72</sup> “But you, O my soul, among all these things that I have said about that supreme trinity—and I dare not claim that any of them is worthy of this unimaginable mystery, but must rather confess that his knowledge is too wonderful for me and has been too mighty and I have not been capable of it.” Augustine, *trin.* 15, 27, 50, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, I/5, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012), p. 441.

## Conclusion

“We confess one baptism for the forgiving of sins”<sup>73</sup> is the faith proclaimed in the Nicene-Constantinople Creed of 381. This essentially is also the creed that Catholics still profess every Sunday at Mass. What is more, this is the creed that binds all Christians together, as it was promulgated before the Schism of 1054 and the Reformation that began in 1517. Scripture, the Creed of 381, Augustine as well as the magisterium of the Catholic Church all avow that there must only be one baptism. Many churches today would recognize as valid the baptisms conferred in a faith tradition other than their own. So if there is anything that holds Christians together, it is this one baptism that joins us in our burial with the one Lord Jesus Christ, and in our one faith in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Augustine's theology of baptism is very much echoed in the *Catechism*, which gives the fundamentals of Catholic teaching. But the Catholic Church has no monopoly over the writings of this great saint. Augustine's doctrine on baptism is not developed in light of ecumenism but amidst the threat of various heresies. He writes against the Donatists in *On Baptism*, and against the Pelagians in *The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins and the Baptism of Little Ones* as well as *The Grace of Christ and Original Sin*. Yet, what is most interesting is that many of his assertions drawn from his polemic against the Donatist and

Pelagian heresies are in fact very useful for ecumenical purposes—his argument against rebaptism and his insistence on its corollary of having only one baptism best demonstrate this. The premise behind such assertions of Augustine is the prime importance he gives to the unity of the Church. He reminds the Donatists that Cyprian should be revered for his defending the unity of the Church rather than his rebaptizing returning apostates. For the Bishop of Hippo, the greatest crime of the Donatists is their destroying the unity of the church in Africa. So if ecumenism is about bringing Christians together as the one body of Christ, then Augustine's concern for the unity of the Church as the *totus Christus* definitely shows his support for such endeavour. Augustine, being a Church Father so well-liked and respected by Christians of all faith traditions, is in a privileged position to be our ambassador in our journey towards greater unity.

<sup>73</sup> Council of Constantinople I, *The exposition of the 150 fathers, in Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, p. 24.