

AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF GROANING: AUGUSTINE, THE PSALMS, AND THE MAKING OF CHURCH

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[The author offers a new approach to Augustine's understanding of Church and exegesis by concentrating on his practice of preaching about the psalms. More than other biblical books, the psalms were conceived not principally as texts to be explained. Rather, they were the "voice of the whole Christ" that gave expression to a wide variety of experiences of the ecclesial body. The practice/performance of Augustine's preaching is itself theologically significant. Attention to the theological dynamics of his biblical interpretation not only suggests the need to revise categories of "exegesis" and "ecclesiology" when speaking about Augustine but also offers insight into a Church that continues to groan under the burden of scandal.]

IN RECENT ISSUES of *Theological Studies*, the history of exegesis has claimed the attention of biblical scholars, historians, and systematic theologians. Michael Cahill hears a "definite crescendo" sounding from those who study the history of exegesis, and he insists that traditional biblical scholars must now listen to these new dialogue-partners.¹ Marie Anne Mayeski adds that systematic theologians will also benefit from joining the conversation. French theologians of the mid-20th century, for instance, turned to patristic exegesis as a response to perceived limitations of the historical-critical method. Particularly in their study of typology, they sought to find in the tradition a precedent for treating the Bible, not simply as a deposit of historical record, but as a living, revelatory word in the context of the Church.² To study the practice of ancient exegesis is to

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¹ Michael Cahill, "The History of Exegesis and Our Theological Future," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000) 332–47, at 336.

² Marie Anne Mayeski, "Quaestio Disputata: Catholic Theology and the History of Exegesis," *Theological Studies* 62 (2001) 140–53, at 53.

encounter a theological hermeneutics that could complement the more recent efforts of the historical-critical method.

Theologians of the early 21st century may continue to retrieve from ancient exegesis an understanding of Scripture as the Word of God revealed in the Church, but a new set of challenges face us. The Church itself may appear far more complex, ambiguous, and problematic than it did in the 1950s. At least in the United States, the actual trials, the sufferings, the scandals of recent history provoke us to ask (with a certain pain and humility) how it is that the Church may be considered the context of God's revelation. Here again, though, the actual practice of ancient exegesis—occasional, rhetorical, polemical, constructive—provides us an excellent resource. As a case in point, I shall argue that Augustine's exegesis of the psalms, as demonstrated in his *Enarrationes in psalmos*, offers us an ecclesiology particularly suitable to a Church in crisis. This "ecclesiology of groaning" (as I shall call it) resists formal systematization and idealization precisely because it emerges from the revelatory dynamism of the Word itself, whose mission, for Augustine, crucially includes embodiment in the sullied, vulnerable flesh. Such a dynamism, expressed so poignantly throughout the *Enarrationes in psalmos*, challenges us to revise our very categories for understanding "exegesis" and "ecclesiology." After a critical evaluation of how these terms may be applied to Augustine's work, I shall then offer an account of Augustine's theology of the psalms and show how recent social theory may help us find new ways for considering the relationship between biblical commentary and the building up of the Church. This "ecclesiology of groaning" provides a new access not only to Augustine's Church but to our own.

AUGUSTINE AND EMBODIED EXEGESIS

I examine here how the revelatory word operates in the Church by highlighting an aspect of patristic exegesis that goes largely unexplored by historical theologians: its social and cultural function. At least since the rise of the historical-critical method, biblical exegesis has remained an overwhelmingly silent affair and has enjoyed a certain independence from an ecclesial setting. "Texts" (as the Bible is so frequently conceived) lie open for scientific examination, inquiry, and comment, but in the scholarly mode such researches are individually pursued and physically mute.³ For the ancient Church, on the other hand, the Bible provided foremost and pre-

³ Even Sandra Schneiders's highly regarded treatment of Scripture in its full theological and ecclesiological dimensions focuses on the written word. See Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (2nd ed., Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999).

dominantly a public, oral, and auditory encounter. While Augustine himself, for instance, had privileged access to a great library and spent considerable time in private meditation on the written text of Scripture, the vast majority of Christians in fourth- and fifth-century North Africa heard the Word of God spoken and explained in the context of liturgical readings and preaching.⁴ Augustine comments on the physical demands of hearing the Word toward the end of a long homily on Psalm 147. Contrasting the bodily fatigue of his congregation to the zeal of the crowds thronging the amphitheater, Augustine points to the discipline and stamina of those who patiently study the psalms: “If [those in the theater] had to stand so long, would they still be at their show?”⁵

For Augustine, then, the oral “exegesis” of Scripture, unlike the scholarly productions of later history, constituted an event that he will often compare with the spectacles taking place outside his basilica. If practitioners of the historical-critical method may, for their own purposes, appropriately beware of the rhetorical virtuosity of one such as Augustine, the theologian may by no means discount the modality in which Scripture and its exegesis is communicated among late ancient Christians. Not only does the ecclesial performance of Augustine and his congregation frame his exegesis, but the practice of that exegesis itself forms the *ecclesia* in a way that is theologically significant. Furthermore, attention to the performative aspects of Augustine’s exegesis yields a new way of approaching his ecclesiology. Augustine’s actual practice of interpreting the psalms with his community, I argue, “makes” the Church: it generates the *ecclesia* at a distinct historical moment. Not only does this complex process call for a revision of what we may mean by ancient “exegesis,” therefore, but the practice and performance of that exegesis provides sources for a more dynamic ecclesiology, whose contours are more fully discerned by considering not only what his exegesis *describes* conceptually but also what it *does* concretely.

Augustine’s treatment of the psalms provides an especially rich context for examining the practical efficacy of his exegesis. Not only in the *Confessions* does Augustine describe his own experience of the psalms as therapeutic (9.4), but throughout his preaching he repeatedly insists that the words of the Psalmist are words that members of his congregation may

⁴ James J. O’Donnell, “Bible,” in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 100.

⁵ Augustine, *Enarratio in psalmum* 147.21. Latin citations are from the edition in *Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina*, vols. 38–40. All psalm numbers and verses here refer to Augustine’s *Vetus Latina* version of the Psalter. English translations are mine, though a wonderful new set of translations has just been completed as Augustine, *Expositions of the Psalms*, trans. Maria Boulding (New York: New City, 2000–2004).

themselves voice in their own condition. A primary strategy of Augustine's exegesis is to show how the psalms apply to his congregation. Unlike passages of other biblical books, the words of the psalms are formally assimilable to the lives of those who hear them: "If the psalm prays, you pray; if it groans, you groan," Augustine asserts. "For all things written here are a mirror to us."⁶ Augustine's understanding of the psalms' effect on the soul reflects his acquaintance with ancient philosophical teaching on the affections. The right words (*locutiones*) could heal unwholesome emotions.⁷ The medicinal properties of the psalms' locutions may largely explain the burgeoning interest in the psalms among early ascetics. The rise of monasticism in the fourth century brought a proliferation of psalm commentaries.⁸ Unlike most of these commentaries, however, which seem to be directed at monastic communities, Augustine addresses his church as a whole: from those who have come to the basilica to avoid the temptation of games, circuses, and fights to the converted astrologer, from the consecrated virgin to the married mother. In what comes down to us as his *Enarrationes in psalmos*, a vast collection of notes and sermons on the psalms given over the course of almost 30 years (ca. A.D. 392–422), Augustine speaks directly to a gross and complex populace whom he can hardly idealize.

In extending his commentary beyond the bounds of the ascetical enclosure, Augustine allows the psalms to speak from that thick and mixed body. Because he lives at a time of considerable ecclesial tension, of enduring scandal at the lapse of third-century Catholic bishops, of anguished debates on the nature of the Church, and of bitter challenges posed by the Donatists, his teaching on the *corpus permixtum* has an emotional register that far exceeds its scope simply as an account of the Church. To be a member of such a mixed body is to groan mightily at the obvious iniquities and imperfections that incorporation entails. To find oneself in such a body is to share in the laments so powerfully voiced by the Psalmist: "My heart bellows its groans. All my desire is before you, Lord, and my groaning is not hidden from you" (Psalm 37:9–10). Like the expression of other deep emotions, however, the groaning of the Church resists certain definition: it possesses a quality that Augustine calls *ineffabilis*. The continued groaning of the Church beggars even Augustine's power to describe fully the range of problems or theological issues implicit in it. Through his exegesis, how-

⁶ *En. in ps.* 30(2) s.3.1.

⁷ Michael Fiedrowicz, "Ciuēs sanctae ciuitatis Dei omnes affectiones rectas habent" (Ciu. 14, 9): Terapia delle passioni e preghiera in S. Agostino," *Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum* 53 (1996) 431–40.

⁸ Brian E. Daley, S.J., "Is Patristic Exegesis Still Usable?: Reflections on Early Christian Interpretation of the Psalms," *Communio* 29 (Spring 2002) 204–5. Daley counts at least 21 psalm commentaries among Greek and Latin patristic authors.

ever, Augustine actively appropriates for the Church the groans which resound throughout the psalter and indicates that, by lamenting with the Psalmist and reflecting deeply and continually on that affect, the Church comes to learn what it is, comes to be what it is. This “ecclesiology of groaning” not only eludes the traditional categories used to describe Augustine’s doctrine of the Church but challenges us to find new and far more satisfactory categories, which may arise at least in part from a deeper understanding of the dynamics of his exegesis.

AUGUSTINE AND EMBODIED ECCLESIOLOGY

Like other patristic authors, Augustine offers no formal systematic ecclesiology as such. Throughout the *Enarrationes in psalmos*, he constantly discusses the Church in highly imaginative terms. He draws from the psalms hosts of images so as to meditate on a body which seems almost protean. The *ecclesia* is the moon which waxes and wanes (Psalm 71:7), the earth irrigated and tilled by God (Psalm 36:3), the silvery wings of a dove upon whose back we are borne up (Psalm 67:14), the winepress where the sweetness of fruit may gradually emerge from its bitter skins (Psalm 8:1).⁹ However centrally the Church figures in Augustine’s practice of exegesis, it never becomes an object of particular study as such. Rather, the Church itself embodies the complex and exceedingly problematic condition of humanity’s return to God, and that body finds rich self-expression in the Psalter. To hunt the works of Augustine in order to construct a conceptually precise *De Ecclesia* is to fail in appreciating the peculiar dynamism of ancient thinking about the Church, its unsystematic, its highly rhetorical and frequently polemical aspects.¹⁰

For at least 50 years now, theologians have harvested the corpus of Augustine’s biblical commentaries for their ecclesiological content but with a methodology that tends to abstract citations from his actual practice. Few studies have considered the event of his exegesis as itself theologically significant. In 1955, Hans Urs von Balthasar included many passages from Augustine’s scriptural commentaries in his anthology of texts on the Church.¹¹ The succeeding decades witnessed two excellent monographs,

⁹ See *En. in ps.* 71.10 (Church as moon), 36 s.1.4 (as earth), 67.17 (as dove), 8.1 (as winepress). For a catalogue of images, see Amy Germaine Oden, “Dominant Images for the Church in Augustine’s *Enarrationes in psalmos*: A Study in Augustine’s Ecclesiology” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Methodist University, 1990) 265–80.

¹⁰ For an example of the attempt to construct a systematic ecclesiology from Augustine, see Stanislaus Grabowski, *The Church: An Introduction to the Theology of St. Augustine* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1957).

¹¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Augustinus: Das Antlitz der Kirche: Auswahl und Übertragung* (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1955; orig. ed. 1942).

one on Augustine's understanding of the heavenly Church and the other on the "Church of this time."¹² Both works relied heavily on Augustine's biblical exegesis, especially that delivered in the course of his preaching. As much as these works brought into relief the complexity of Augustine's thought and the profusion of images he employed to describe the Church, they did not consider how his exegesis itself represented the dynamic process wherein the Church comes to be. Thus a common paradigm, which finds in Augustine two distinct ecclesiologies—the Church visible and invisible, the earthly Church and the heavenly Church—continues to influence our perception and leads to claims that Augustine's sense of Church is marked by an "ultraspiritualism" or Platonic idealization that ignores the concrete ecclesial reality. Speaking of Augustine's treatment of the psalms in the *Enarrationes in psalmos*, Louis Bouyer remarks that "the 'body' [of Christ] is so spiritualized that what is corporal about it can no longer be seen."¹³ Yet such a comment betrays the tendency of theologians to isolate discrete statements made in the course of Augustine's preaching from their actual context. We should not ignore that Augustine's discussion of the same "body" comes from settings where he refers to his sweating before a packed house, or to the stench generated by his congregation over the course of his sermon, where he pleads with a great crowd in Carthage to quiet down because his voice is liable to give out or mentions the way they groan when enduring the burdens of incorrigible members of the body.¹⁴ *This* body (i.e., the one he addresses, the one that groans through the voice of the psalms) is hardly marked by an ultraspiritualism.

Augustine does indeed locate this body within an eschatological horizon. The unfinished or unrealized quality of the Church always stands at the center of his reflection. While commenting on the verse that most immediately expresses the theme of the *City of God* (Psalm 86:4 "Glorious things are said of you, O City of God"), Augustine reminds his hearers that as "the wicked city runs its course from beginning to end, so too the good city is continuously being formed by the conversion of the wicked."¹⁵ The history within which he places himself and his hearers is the gradual edi-

¹² Émilien Lamirande, *L'Église céleste selon saint Augustin* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1963). Pasquale Borgomeo, *L'Église de ce temps dans la prédication de saint Augustin* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1972).

¹³ Louis Bouyer, *The Church of God: Body of Christ and Temple of the Spirit*, trans. Charles Underhill Quinn (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1982) 25.

¹⁴ On sweating before a packed house, see *En. in ps. 32* (2) s.2.9: "I see how packed in you are, but you too see how I am sweating!" On the stench, 72.34: "I forgot how long I talked. Now the psalm is over, and I can tell from the stench in here that I have given too long a sermon!" On his voice, 50.1: "I ask for your silence and quiet, so that my voice may be able to keep enough strength after yesterday's labor." For a longer discussion of the groans, 54.8.

¹⁵ *En. in ps. 61.7.*

fication of Jerusalem; his exegesis a moment within that history. If we take Augustine's account seriously, then the object of ecclesiology must always remain and must always return to that dynamic of conversion, of formation through which Jerusalem is built up.¹⁶

Not only does this approach to ecclesiology reflect the vitality of Augustine's ancient sense of Church throughout his exegesis, but it is one which fits more recent studies on the proper object and method of ecclesiology. In his own *Foundations in Ecclesiology*, for instance, Joseph Komonchak takes Lonergan's understanding of the Church as a "process of self-constitution," a community that "perfects itself through communication" and argues that all reflection on the Church must therefore be a "reflection on this constitutive self-expression and self-realization."¹⁷ Statements about the Church, then, the multiple images of the Church, as well as the actions and historical developments of the Church, are significant not only for their discrete content but also for their quality as themselves constituting the *ecclesia's* ongoing self-appropriation or "coming-to-consciousness" of itself. Komonchak argues that the study of the Church as in the process of self-constitution represents the "foundational" effort of ecclesiology.¹⁸

Augustine's exegesis of the psalms, as manifested in the *Enarrationes in psalmos*, constitutes a very significant case in point. Not only does Augustine consistently use images and psalm verses to communicate the experience and nature of the Church, but throughout this sprawling work, he repeatedly offers a unique and dynamic understanding of the psalms themselves. They are, he asserts again and again, the *uox totius Christi*, the voice of the whole Christ, head and body, the one voice of the Incarnate Word speaking to, with, and within the Church. For Augustine, the psalms possess a dialectical character and comprise an ongoing, communicative exchange between God and humanity within the ecclesial body, which prays and meditates upon them. This theologically dynamic conception of the psalms as *uox totius Christi*, therefore, not only serves as a heuristic device grounding Augustine's exegetical enterprise but effectively offers a new key for understanding Augustine's ecclesiology itself. Insofar as ecclesial existence is formed, interpreted, and known in the context of Augustine's

¹⁶ See T. Johannes van Bavel, "What Kind of Church Do You Want? The Breadth of Augustine's Ecclesiology," *Louvain Studies* 7 (1979) 147–71. Van Bavel argues that Augustine conceives the Church not as an institution with a fixed and well-defined structure but as a "pluriform event" (147), as a "reality in process [which] has to pass through several phases in order to reach its specific goal" (148).

¹⁷ Joseph A. Komonchak, *Foundations in Ecclesiology* (Boston: Boston College, 1995) 49. See Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) 363.

¹⁸ Komonchak, *Foundations in Ecclesiology* 3–56.

psalm exegesis, attention to the theologically complex and dynamic quality of that exegesis represents a significant moment in what Komanchak calls the “foundational effort” of ecclesiology.

The *Enarrationes in psalmos*, however, not only set forth the theological model of the *totus Christus*, wherein the psalms are interpreted: they also reflect a concrete social context. To the extent that students of Augustine’s ecclesiology tend to concentrate on his theological claims in isolation from their situation or the socially productive nature of his exegesis, they indeed risk the kind of theological reductionism or idealization noted above. As Komonchak has insisted, ecclesiology must extend beyond the questions of “hermeneutics of texts” to “hermeneutics of social existence.”¹⁹ The *Enarrationes in psalmos* represent a privileged place where we may engage in both. Here the theological enterprise may gain from the insights of social theorists. Although social theory is avowedly empirical and non-theological, its methods are nonetheless very helpful for understanding more completely the ecclesiology of the *Enarrationes*.²⁰ While theologians will reorient what they might learn from the human sciences, a consideration of their own dynamism will be crucial. In what follows, therefore, I shall first offer a brief exposition of Augustine’s theological hermeneutic of the *vox totius Christi*. Then I shall draw from the work of social theorists to illustrate how Augustine’s exegesis may rightly be conceived as a moment of the Church’s self-appropriation.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF AUGUSTINE’S THEOLOGY OF THE PSALMS

Although most students of the history of exegesis are familiar with Augustine’s unique approach to the psalms as the “voice of the whole Christ,” many treat it as though it were a univocal concept.²¹ In fact, Augustine’s understanding of the *vox totius Christi* develops as his Christology develops: increasingly he stresses the revelatory significance of the body. A fuller appreciation of this shifting theology of the psalms, therefore, will have significant impact on the way we understand the relationship between

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 53.

²⁰ In his own analysis of “systematic ecclesiology,” Neil Ormerod has noted the resistance among theologians to engage in the methods of human sciences but argues that a full understanding of biblical symbols for Church requires the adoption of non-theological categories. See Neil Ormerod, “The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology,” *Theological Studies* 63 (2002) 3–30, at 11.

²¹ Michael Fiedrowicz, for example, offers an excellent, comprehensive study of the *vox totius Christi* without tracing developments in Augustine’s thinking (*Psalms Vox Totius Christi: Studien zu Augustins “Enarrationes in Psalmos”* [Freiburg: Herder, 1997]). For a recent critique, see Michael Cameron’s review in *Augustinian Studies* 34 (2003) 266–77.

Augustine's exegesis and his ecclesiology.²² Like other early Christian commentators on the Psalter, Augustine worked out of a tradition that stressed the prophetic function of the Hebrew Bible. The psalms were David's prophecy and David is himself a type of the King yet to come. The rule of Hilary of Poitiers in the mid-fourth century reflects a basic strategy common to all patristic exegetes: "All prophecy of the psalms must be applied to Christ."²³ Like other authors, Augustine will seek references to Christ through the technique of prosopological exegesis, wherein the reader of the psalm identifies what person [*prosopon*] is speaking in a given verse or to what character a verse refers.²⁴ So, for instance, Augustine takes Psalm 2:2 ("Let us burst their chains asunder, and throw their yoke away from us") as referring to those who devised schemes to crucify Christ. Verse 6 of the same psalm, however ("I have been established by God as king over Zion"), is clearly spoken in the person of Christ himself [*ex persona ipsius Domini*].²⁵

While Augustine will go on to develop both the Christocentric and the prosopological interpretation of the psalms in a wholly original and rather complex way, he begins the *Enarrationes in psalmos* in a very traditional manner. In his earliest commentaries on Psalms 1–32, thought to be written shortly after his ordination in 391, Augustine seems to accept and apply the principle formulated by his Donatist contemporary Tyconius: that all Scripture speaks of Christ and the Church, head and body, *de domino et corpore eius*, and that it remains the task of the exegete, therefore, to discern when the reference of verses passes from head to body and *vice versa*.²⁶ So he concludes his commentary on Psalm 17 by noting that "[w]hatever things have been said in this psalm which cannot properly fit the Lord himself, that is, the head of the Church, must be referred to the Church. For the

²² Throughout this discussion I am indebted to Michael Cameron, who convincingly argues that shifts in Augustine's Christology in the 390s correspond to shifts in his understanding of signs and therefore the *Enarrationes in psalmos*. See his "Augustine's Construction of Figurative Exegesis against the Donatists in the *Enarrationes in psalmos*" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1996). Also his "Enarrationes in psalmos," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* 290–96.

²³ Hilary of Poitiers, *Tractatus super psalmum* 1.2 (CCSL 61.20): *Omnis ad eum prophetia est referenda psalmoreum*.

²⁴ For a discussion of prosopological exegesis in Augustine, see Hubertus Drobner, *Person-Exegese und Christologie bei Augustinus: Zur Herkunft der Formel Una Persona* (Leiden: Brill, 1986). In patristic commentaries on the psalms more generally, see Marie-Josèphe Rondeau, *Les commentaires patristiques du Psautier (III-Ve siècles)*, 2 vols., *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* 219/220 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Studium Orientalium, 1982–1985).

²⁵ *En. in ps.* 2.5.

²⁶ See *De Doctrina Christiana* 3.30.42–33.46 (CCSL 32.102–106). The dating of the *En. in ps.* is an extraordinarily complex affair. See Fiedrowicz, *Psalmus* 430–49, for a table of the variety of scholarly conjectures on chronology.

whole Christ speaks here, in which all his members subsist.”²⁷ Likewise, he begins his exegesis on Psalm 24 by stating that the words of this psalm pertain to the Christian people converted to God, and that therefore Christ is speaking, “but in the person of the Church [*sed in ecclesiae persona*].”²⁸

If Augustine’s earlier exegesis, then, manifests the Tyconian concern to distinguish when Christ the head speaks and when Christ the body speaks, increasingly throughout his commentary these voices tend to mix, and his exegesis does not uniformly stress the distinctive voices of the head or body, but the one voice of the whole Christ. Although Augustine will continue to ask at times who is speaking and although he will note the change in speakers, the “one voice” of the psalms comes to express, if not actually effect, the union of God and humanity, the one true mediator.²⁹ By virtue of the Incarnation, Christ did not disdain “to speak in our words so that we in turn may speak in his.”³⁰ Such an exchange of words, rooted in the divine Word’s appropriation of human flesh, allows Augustine to emphasize the singularity of the psalms’ subject. The “I” who speaks in the psalms is always Christ, the “person” in whom God has definitively joined with all humanity.

Augustine will very frequently refer to the “one voice” speaking throughout the psalms, and all later explanations of the “one voice” of the whole Christ follow the same argument.³¹ His second exposition on Psalm 30, for instance, delivered perhaps some twenty years after his first psalm commentaries, reveals a pattern we see again and again.³² He begins his exposition by considering the title, “To the end. A psalm for David, an ecstasy,” and explains that “ecstasy” can imply either the activity of heavenly contemplation, wherein one loses oneself, or fear, wherein a person is beside oneself.³³ After considering the former possibility, Augustine points out that the content of the psalm does indeed suggest fear. Whose fear? Since the psalm is entitled “To the end . . . for David,” it must be Christ’s fear, and yet Augustine also considers the possibility that the psalm refers to our fear. Even though he demurs at the suggestion that Christ was afraid

²⁷ *En. in ps.* 17.51: Quaecumque in hoc psalmo dicta sunt, quae ipsi Domino proprie, id est capiti ecclesiae congruere non possunt, ad ecclesiam referenda sunt. Totus enim Christus hic loquitur, in quo sunt omnia membra eius.

²⁸ *En. in ps.* 24.1.

²⁹ See, for instance, traditional concerns in *En. in ps.* 44.4–5. Cameron, “Construction” 88–116, traces the development of his Christology from one which naturally fit the Tyconian principle (i.e., a “spiritualist paradigm”) to one which seriously transformed it (i.e., a fully “incarnational paradigm”).

³⁰ *En. in ps.* 30(2) s.1.3: loqui uerbis nostris, ut et nos loqueremur uerbis ipsius.

³¹ *En. in ps.* 30(2) s.1.4; 30(2) s.2.1; 34.2; 40.1; 61.4; 68 s.2.1. 101 s.1.2; 138.21; 142.3.

³² Again, dating is notoriously speculative, but scholarly consensus places this homily after 411. See Fiedrowicz, *Psalmus* 431.

³³ *En. in ps.* 30(2) s.1.2: Psalmus Dauid ecstasis.

as his passion approached, the self-emptying wherein Christ assumed the form of a slave (Philippians 2:7) entails that this fear is, in some sense, his: for “he dresses himself in us [*nos uestire se*],” “assumes us in himself [*assumere nos in se*],” and “transfigures us in himself [*transfigurare nos in se*].”³⁴ Augustine’s language here consistently reflects the change which this act of God’s self-giving in Christ effects in humanity: it is a “wonderful exchange [*mira commutatio*],” a “divine transaction [*diuina . . . commercia*],” a “change of reality effected in this world by the heavenly negotiator [*mutatio rerum celebrata in hoc mundo a negotiatore caelesti*].”³⁵ The human experience of suffering became Christ’s, because he identified himself so completely with us:

He even said this, that his soul was sorrowful to the point of death, and all of us ourselves said it too with him. Why? Because the whole Christ is head and body. That head is the savior of the body, who has already ascended into heaven; the body however is the Church, which labors on earth.³⁶

Augustine typically relies on several key scriptural passages to justify his conception of the unified voice of head and body, yet always with the intention of explaining that the Church’s passion is Christ’s passion. Most crucially, Christ speaks Psalm 21 from the cross on our behalf. In Acts 9:4 the glorified Christ speaks out of a deep relationship with the laboring Christ on earth: Saul hears the voice from heaven calling out: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Augustine asks how Saul could be inflicting injury on the glorified Christ, and yet the words which Saul hears suggest the complete incorporation of Christ: “He did not say: ‘Why are you persecuting my saints’ . . . but ‘Why are you persecuting me?’ The head cries out on behalf of its members, and the head transfigures its members in himself.”³⁷ Augustine draws on Pauline terms to indicate how the incorporation of Christ’s head and members sanctions a kind of *communicatio idiomatum*, where one member appropriates the voice of another to express what does not, properly speaking, pertain to it. In Augustine’s exegesis, being with Christ ultimately leads to a kind of identity of subject, where Christ speaks not only “in the prophet” but in us, his body. Augustine underscores the unity of the psalms’ subject through marital imagery (see Matthew 9:5 “They will be two in one flesh; so they are two no longer, but one flesh”). The great mystery, the *magnum sacramentum* (Ephesians 5:31-32), of the two in one flesh entails the unity of voice: “If two in one flesh, why not two in one voice? Therefore, let Christ speak, because the

³⁴ *En. in ps. 30(2) s.1.3.*

³⁵ *En. in ps. 30(2) s.1.3*

³⁶ *En. in ps. 30(2) s.1.3.*

³⁷ *En. in ps. 30(2) s.1.3.* Augustine returns to this passage from Acts 9:4 constantly. See, among many examples, *En. in ps.26(2).11, 30(2) s.1.3, 37.6, 39.5, 44.20, 54.3, 87.15, 100.3, 122.1, 138.2.*

Church speaks in Christ, and Christ speaks in the Church, both body in the head and head in the body.”³⁸

Augustine’s most distinctive and original contribution to the history of psalm exegesis lies precisely in the conception witnessed here: that the psalm (and indeed the entire Psalter) represents in its language, its verbal prayer, the very heart of the Christian mystery—the exchange of God and humanity in the Word-made-flesh, still abiding in the *totus Christus*.³⁹ In order to understand the meaning of the psalms, the hearer must already be situated in the ecclesial body. To see oneself in the psalm and be healed by it, one must see his/her own passion in the groans and lamentations voiced by the head on the cross. Therein the labor of Augustine’s own exegesis, replete with its own rhetorical dynamics, its own social and cultural function, its performative and practical efficacy, may serve and indeed participate in the transforming grace of Christ in the Church. For the “voice is one,” so that “you may never exclude the head when you hear the body speaking nor the body when you hear the head speaking.”⁴⁰

VOX TOTIUS CHRISTI: PERFORMING AND PRACTICING THE PSALMS

The fact that Augustine returns again and again to the *uox totius Christi* not only reflects its centrality as an exegetical key: the repeated rehearsal of the theme, I argue, is itself theologically significant. Henri-Irénée Marrou mentions that Augustine adverts to the whole Christ over 200 times in his preaching, and Augustine acknowledges to his congregation how often he repeats himself.⁴¹ At the beginning of *En. in ps.* 40, for instance, he notes: “I remind you so often, nor does it tire me to repeat what is useful for you to remember.”⁴² Yet the heuristic framework does not only produce Augustine’s exegesis: it produces the body reflected in that exegesis. The very process wherein the body uses and hears its own voice in union with the head contributes to the fashioning of the body as Church. Augustine’s constant reference to the psalms’ being the voice of the whole Christ underscores the deeply sacramental quality of the congregation’s activity.

³⁸ *En. in ps.* 30(2) s.1.4. See too similar references to Eph. 5 in *En. in ps.* 34 s.2.1, 37.6, 54.3, 74.4, 90 s.2.5, 138.2.

³⁹ See Rondeau, 2.369: “Mais ce qui est fondamentalement nouveau, c’est qu’Augustin érige en principe général, valable pour l’ensemble du Psautier, l’idée que, partout, c’est la voix du Christ qui se fait entendre, parlant tantôt au nom de la tête, tantôt au nom du corps: deux dans une seule voix.”

⁴⁰ *En. in ps.* 37.6: *Neque cum corporis uoces audieritis, separetis caput; neque cum capitis uoces audieritis, separetis corpus.*

⁴¹ Henri-Irénée Marrou, *Time and Timeliness*, trans. Violet Nevile (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969) 35. See too Borgomeo, 192–97, on the “Frequency of the Theme” of the *totus Christus*.

⁴² *En. in ps.* 40.1. See too *En. in ps.* 54.3.

As the humanity of Christ is a sign of the divine Word making that Word present to the believer, so the Church, to the extent that it is united to Christ as his body, makes present the same reality of Christ. For Augustine, then, revelation through the psalms occurs simultaneously with our living the reality they signify: becoming the one Christ by sharing in his voice, being transfigured into himself.⁴³

This theological dynamism in Augustine's view of the psalms as *uox totius Christi* impresses upon us his understanding of the Church as a "pluriform event" or a "reality in process," not a Platonic idealization.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the deeply Christological and ecclesiological foundation of his exegesis may be illuminated by more recent hermeneutical and social theories that stress the productive nature of interpretation. Ricoeur, for instance, stresses the constructive quality of interpretation as an "event" or "making [*poiesis*]" and repeatedly insists that the actual performance of discourse is integral to its meaning.⁴⁵ Robert Markus, in his study of "Word and Text in Ancient Christianity," avers that Augustine was unique among ancient Christians in insisting on the social construction of meaning.⁴⁶ Such a view does not lessen but increases the significance of Augustine's complex emphasis on the ecclesial setting of exegesis. In what follows, then, I shall consider how recent theoretical discussions of performance and prac-

⁴³ Such a dynamic is closely tied to Augustine's concept of biblical authority, which cannot be detached from the authority of the Church. Cf. the discussion of Augustine's statement of *C. Epist. fund.* 5.6 ("Ego uero Euangelio non crederem, nisi me catholicae Ecclesiae commoueret auctoritas.") in Pierre-Thomas Camelot, "Autorité de l'Écriture, Autorité de l'Église à propos d'un texte de saint Augustin," in *Mélanges offerts à M.-D. Chenu*, Bibliothèque thomiste (Paris: Vrin, 1967) 130: "C'est là déjà laisser entrevoir que l'*auctoritas* de l'Église n'est pas extérieure ni étrangère à celle de l'Évangile: l'une et l'autre remontent au Christ lui-même." Note also the excellent discussion in Howard J. Loewen, "The Use of Scripture in Augustine's Theology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981) 201–24. In the same way, the inspiration of Scripture cannot be conceived apart from the divine activity of forming the Church. The biblical "author" is the same as the "author" of the Church. The implications of this point of connection for a theology of biblical exegesis are profound.

⁴⁴ Again, see van Bavel, 147–48 (see n. 16 above).

⁴⁵ See Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1977) 39. Cited in Cameron, "Construction" 297. See also, Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1976) 11: "[L]inguistic competence actualizes itself in performance."

⁴⁶ Robert Markus, *Signs and Meanings: World and Text in Ancient Christianity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University, 1996) 40–41: "Traditions of interpretation generate communities, and interpretation is a social construction of a meaning related to a text." Given the divine origin both of the community and the "text," however, such generation may be seen as the continued mission of the Word.

tice may enhance our understanding of Augustine's dynamic ecclesiology in the *Enarrationes in psalmos*.

Performing the Psalms: En. in ps. 93

The concept of performance would be particularly appropriate for studying Augustine's exegesis of the psalms if only because he himself clearly recognized that his preaching was a kind of "performance." Not only do his references to applause and his interaction with the audience reflect the dramatic quality of his scriptural commentary, but, as we have seen, regular remarks that he is preaching in competition with the spectacles and theatrical shows outside imply that they are alternative performances.⁴⁷ On one occasion, while commenting on the title of Psalm 80 ("For the olive presses"), Augustine says that the presses symbolize the Church, where the pure oil oozes invisibly while dregs run outside on the pavement for everyone to see. He compares the dregs to the crowds gathering for the circus shows immediately outside the Church that day. By contrast, those who sing and reflect on the psalms are invisibly strained within: "Pay attention to this great spectacle. For God does not fail to provide for us something to look at with great joy. Can the crazy fascination of the circus be compared to this spectacle? Those shows are like to the dregs; this to the oil."⁴⁸ The "great spectacle" is the performance which takes place within the Church. At the end of the same homily, Augustine tells his audience that, in Christ's name, God has produced constructive entertainments [*diuina spectacula*], which have held them spellbound.⁴⁹ Referring to the maritime games [*mare in teatro*] to be celebrated the following day, Augustine urges his congregation to return to the: "let us have our port in Christ."⁵⁰

Such explicit references to the theater do not alone justify a consider-

⁴⁷ See *En. in ps.* 39.6, 80.2, 80.23, 99.12. Also, on applause, see *En. in ps.* 26(2).8; 147.15. Note the comment by Frederik van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop: The Life and Work of a Father of the Church*, trans. Brian Battershaw and G. R. Lamb (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961) 427: "Neither in Hippo nor in Carthage did Augustine have ground for complaining that his hearers were not receptive to their fingertips, and indeed in that day an orator who sought contact with his audience never failed to find it. Augustine certainly did so. Even the transcriptions of the *notarii*, from which much light and shade has naturally disappeared, show us that many sermons were punctuated by loud applause, sometimes, indeed, by complete dialogues between speaker and audience, all of which have been faithfully reproduced."

⁴⁸ *En. in ps.* 80.1: Intendite ad magnum hoc spectaculum. Non enim desinit Deus edere nobis quod cum magno gaudio spectemus; aut circi insania huic spectaculo comparanda est? Illa ad amurcam pertinet, hoc ad oleum.

⁴⁹ *En. in ps.* 80.23.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

ation of Augustine's exegesis as performance. More recent scholarship on ritual has also identified formal similarities between theater and religious activity. Symbolic acts of interpretation, such as the singing and reflection on the psalms, shape a culture.⁵¹ "Performance" helps generate a community, fashion its identity and form its self-understanding. Since J. L. Austin's influential distinction between "descriptive" and "performative" statements, scholars have been keenly sensitive to the porousness of the boundary between ritual act and saying.⁵² Attention to the way statements may execute some action in their very utterance must clearly affect our understanding of "exegesis" and patristic exegesis in particular. The activity of reciting and reflecting on the psalms tends to "enact" or produce their meaning. Yet, taken within a theological horizon, such "enactment" forms part of the sacramental and ecclesial efficacy of the Word.

Augustine's commentary on Psalm 93 offers a fine example of four components that most theorists identify as constituting a religious "performance": (1) an "event" that (2) sets up an interpretative "frame" (3) with a peculiar transforming "efficacy" (4) corresponding to certain "self-reflexive" processes.⁵³ The psalm itself begs God to arise and give the proud their just deserts (v. 2). The trials which God's virtuous people suffer at the hands of the proud (vv. 4–11) are set in contrast to the blessings that will be given to the virtuous (vv. 12–15). The psalm ends with praise of God, who is a refuge and helper (v. 22) and reaffirms the speaker's confidence that the Lord will bring retribution: "according to their malice will the Lord our God destroy them" (v. 23). Yet through Augustine's exegesis, the Church becomes the script with which he works. In his introduction he points out: it seems as only yesterday when we ourselves suffered at the hands of a powerful, unjust family.⁵⁴

⁵¹ For a useful overview and bibliography, see Mary Suydam, "An Introduction to Performance Studies," in *Performance and Transformation: New Approaches to Late Medieval Spirituality*, ed. Mary A. Suydam and Joanna E. Ziegler (New York: St. Martin's, 1999) 1–26.

⁵² J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (2nd ed.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1975) [originally delivered in 1955 as the William James Lectures]. Augustine's own deep anxiety over language in *Confessions* reflects his own self-consciousness of the "performative" quality of speech. The words of classical texts (e.g., the speech of the Vergilian Juno, recounted in *Conf.* 1.17.27) form a notably different person and culture than those of the Bible, particularly when one learns to declaim them *in propria uoce*.

⁵³ Here and throughout the discussion of performance, I am relying on Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University, 1997) 74–75.

⁵⁴ *En. in ps.* 93.1. What this "domus potentissima" was eludes us but must clearly have been recognized by Augustine's hearers.

The actual context of Augustine's sermon gives it the quality of a very distinct "event." Preaching to an assembly of bishops meeting in Thagaste in A.D. 414 or 415, Augustine performs before his audience for two hours.⁵⁵ He even ends his exposition by anticipating their complaint: "Perhaps the length of this sermon was too laborious for you."⁵⁶ Still, he hopes that the role that has caused him to sweat so much will contribute to the salvation of his hearers. Not only does Augustine's preaching to a group of bishops give his exegesis a heightened significance as an ecclesial event, but he avows it is a "command performance": "I have preached as ordered, for the Lord our God has ordered me through my brothers, in whom God dwells."⁵⁷ The activity of understanding the psalm is a common work, physically taxing both on the sweating preacher and on the audience, who must be encouraged not to languish: "Pay attention so that, in the name of Christ, we may be strong Christians. There is only a little of the psalm which remains. Let's not flag."⁵⁸ The common toil of this commentary, then, forges the text, speaker, and audience in a pursuit of understanding and trust that, while God seems to allow the wicked to flourish, those who are long-suffering and virtuous shall still find in God their "refuge and hope."

Throughout Augustine's preaching on Psalm 93, he attempts again and again to identify the link between the psalm and the activity in which the audience is currently engaged. The psalm, that is, provides a "frame" wherein the Church's present sufferings may be interpreted as fulfilling the divine purpose revealed through the very pacing of the psalm. The very progression of the psalm verses is a progression of sympathy between God and the listener. So on v. 3 ("Lord, how long shall the ungodly triumph?"), Augustine notes that God plays the part of one lamenting with you at a moment of painful questioning. Like anyone who wishes to console a friend, God cannot lift a person out of his or her trouble without first grieving in sympathy: "So that he may rejoice with you, first you weep with him; you are sad with him so that you may refresh him. So too both the psalm and the Spirit of God, though knowing all things, seeks with you as if speaking your own words."⁵⁹ Through the psalm, God joins Augustine's audience in acting out the part of the righteous sufferer.

⁵⁵ So Gertrude Gillette, "The Glory of God in Augustine's *Enarrationes in psalmos*" (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 1996) 45. *En. in ps.* 93 takes up some 30 pages in the volume in CCSL.

⁵⁶ *En. in ps.* 93.30. *Fortē onerosa fuit uobis longitudo sermonis.*

⁵⁷ *En. in ps.* 93.30: *iussus feci: nam Dominus Deus noster per eos mihi fratres iussit, in quibus habitat.*

⁵⁸ *En. in ps.* 93.24.

⁵⁹ *En. in ps.* 93.9.

Augustine's exegesis, then, creates a moment of self-reflection upon current trials, but the interpretative framework places such tribulation in the context of hope grounded in the Word's own Incarnation, death, and Resurrection. Augustine explains verse 15 ("Until justice is changed into judgment, all who have justice are right of heart") by noting that a period of suffering must precede final judgment. This time and space prior to judgment is precisely the time wherein the Church's faith grows, when God waits for members of the Church to be converted: "Let the Church suffer patiently what the head of the Church suffered patiently."⁶⁰ In this way, the trials which the Psalmist recounts are fashioned into a mysterious discipline of a loving God, who took on himself the vulnerabilities of his body.

While Augustine may be the chief "performer" of the commentary on Psalm 93, the efficacy of the performance lies mostly in the transformation of his audience. He urges his hearers not simply to think about the psalms passively but to live the script reflected in the psalms: "I say this, brothers, so that you may advance from that which you hear For a good life, led by the commands of God, is like a pen which writes in the heart what it hears. If it is written in wax, it is easily blotted out. Write it rather in your hearts, in your conduct, and it will never be blotted out."⁶¹ The psalm is to effect a remedy both for silent thoughts of despair as well as those which break out in words or deeds.

Thus *En. in ps.* 93 illustrates each of the four concepts which performance theorists commonly apply to a public religious activity. (1) The communal singing of the psalm together with Augustine's lengthy *opus* in the august presence of the North African bishops constitute an "event" with clear physical and sensory qualities. (2) Through his exegesis, the psalm becomes a "frame" for understanding the painful experience of trial as a necessary condition prior to God's final judgment. (3) As the exegesis advances, members of Augustine's congregation are invited to place their present sufferings more deeply into the context of Christ's life. Through the psalms, then, the reality of trial becomes the new reality of trial in Christ, whose own sufferings effect our hope, our cure, our transformation. By the end of the psalm we are meant to acclaim God as our refuge and helper and to live out the grace reflected therein. (4) Throughout this process of exegesis, members of his congregation are meant to see themselves, via the reflexive properties of the psalm, as living within the mysterious purpose of God, who has become one with us even in the voice of the whole Christ, which they have vocalized.

⁶⁰ *En. in ps.* 93.8: *Patiatur et ecclesia patienter, quod passum est caput ecclesiae patienter.*

⁶¹ *En. in ps.* 93.30.

Practicing the Psalms: Cultivating a Hungry Body

Another approach to understanding the *Enarrationes in psalmos* as forming the *ecclesia* also derives from the study of ritual, whose practice cultivates a social and cultural environment and creates a *habitus* or set of dispositions that in turn generate further practice.⁶² Practice theorists are particularly interested in the way personal agents involved in a religious ritual “embody” schemes that shape the way experience is understood and categorized. The body is a “microcosm of the universe,” which enjoys a central place in the “social construction of reality.”⁶³ Knowledge itself is not just propositional or mental but bodily too. Kneeling, for instance, not only communicates subordination to the kneeler but also “produces a subordinated kneeler in and through the act itself.”⁶⁴ In a similar way, Augustine’s practice of exegesis, itself grounded in reference to the body, may be understood as actually “creating” the body of Christ.

Augustine’s interpretation of the psalms as *uox totius Christi* turns crucially on the notion that the Church, as the body, and Christ, as the head, make up a single organism whose single voice the psalms represent. In Augustine’s explanation of the hermeneutical principles, however, Christ’s incorporation entails the assumption of immense vulnerability. It is the persecuted body to which the head, in all humility, attaches himself (Acts 9:4), the body that, in the words of the Gospel of Matthew, is hungry, thirsty, estranged, naked, sick, and in prison (Matthew 25:40).⁶⁵ As a way of identifying how Augustine finds that vulnerable ecclesial body in the psalms, let us ask what image of “body” is represented in the Psalter or what is the characteristic “voice” of that body as raised in the Book of Psalms.

In Augustine’s Psalter, the word *corpus* is not often attested. Words for bodily parts, however, are frequently used, as if synecdochally, to refer to

⁶² See Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* 77, who cites the following studies of “practice”: Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976). Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: Cambridge University, 1977). See also, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, 1990).

⁶³ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University, 1992) 94

⁶⁴ Bell takes the example of kneeling as not simply communicating a value, say of subordination, so much as “generat[ing] a body identified with subordinating . . . the molding of the body within a highly structured environment does not simply express inner states. Rather, it primarily acts to restructure bodies in the very doing of the acts themselves” (ibid. 100).

⁶⁵ Both scriptural verses appear repeatedly in Augustine’s explanation of the *uox totius Christi*. See *En. in ps.* 26(2).11; 30(2).3; 50.11; 59.3; 109.18, for a few examples.

the body. Among these words *caro* (flesh), *uenter* (stomach), *ossa* (bones), *interiora* (inner parts) appear most frequently. In the vast majority of cases, such words denote the deficient, unrealized, vulnerable quality of the body that seeks completion in God alone. In Psalm 15:9, the Psalmist proclaims that, having found refuge in God, “even my flesh shall now rest in hope.” Psalm 72:26 laments: “My heart and my flesh have failed, but you are the God of my heart.” Psalm 37:4 also cries out “There is no soundness of my flesh in the presence of your anger.” Psalm 30:10 asks the Lord for mercy in distress, “for my eye has been disturbed by your wrath, so too my soul and belly,” and Psalm 31:3 proclaims: “My bones grew old because of my silence, in consequence of my shouting all day long.” In the Psalter, the body is a site of more pain than pleasure. Augustine’s exegesis highlights such pain and effectively teaches the Church how to be the “body” of Christ.

Nor is that body an abstraction.⁶⁶ Rather, in Augustine’s exegesis the body manifests natural features of diet and reproduction. Situated in a world whose dangers the psalms so dramatically express, the *ecclesia* as body must constantly find sustenance in its hunger and thirst. Indeed, the “body” of Christ that emerges in the *Enarrationes* is quite strikingly one that seeks to eat and alternately avoids being eaten. The command to Peter to “slaughter and eat” (Acts 10:13) appears at several points in the *Enarrationes* as a sign of the Church’s natural growth.⁶⁷ Even former persecutors find themselves in the Church: “They were eaten by the Church. You look for them in themselves, and you don’t find them. Look for them in what has eaten them, and they will be found in the Church’s belly.”⁶⁸ The image of Christ’s body eating the nations, however, frequently stresses the struggle of the body to ingest. For instance, Augustine puts Psalm 30:11 (“My life was impelled by sorrow and my years faded amid sighs”) into the mouth of a Christian pastor who, through hard work and preaching, tries to win over and “eat” other people. Such is nature of the Church: “Whenever we win over people for the Lord, somehow the Church eats them. What does “eats” mean? It brings them into its body. For whatever we eat, we bring into our body.”⁶⁹ For Augustine, however, the particular expression of this psalm verse refers to the discouragement a preacher feels when his work seems ineffectual: “His life is weakened and in want. And a miserable

⁶⁶ Borgomeo, 170 (see n. 12 above) underscores that Augustine’s concept of the Church as body is highly “organic.” While Scholastic theology held an ecclesiology of the Mystical Body of Christ, such a body is an abstraction: its “diet,” as it were, is “strictly vegetarian.”

⁶⁷ *En. in ps.* 3.7; 13.4; 30(2) s. 2.5; 34 s.2.15; 58 s.1.16; 73.16; 123.5; 149.13.

⁶⁸ *En. in ps.* 98.5.

⁶⁹ *En. in ps.* 30 (2) s.2.5.

sort of want and hunger it is.”⁷⁰ So too the hunger of dogs in Psalm 58:15–16 (“Let them be converted in the evening and feel like hungry dogs”) refers to the desire of the converted to assimilate others into the body to which they now belong. While they go out to preach, they complain that no one hears and so bark hungrily.⁷¹

Being the body of Christ and vying to eat the nations, however, also entails the risk of being eaten. Psalm 34:24–26 expresses the fear of one who prays: “Do not let my enemies insult me. Let them not say in their hearts, ‘Hooray! Hooray!’ to our soul. Let them not say ‘We have swallowed them up.’” Noting again that swallowing means absorbing something into one’s body, Augustine warns his congregation that “the world wants to swallow you, but you must swallow the world; draw it into your own body, slaughter and eat it.”⁷² Indeed, the “teeth of sinners [*denes peccatorum*]” (Psalm 3:8) represent those authorities who incorporate a person into their own corrupt lives, and the lament that “you have handed us over like sheep for butchering” (Psalm 43:12) refers to those corrupt members of the Church, who have been “absorbed into the body of the nations . . . devoured by the pagans. The Church wails for them as if its own members had been devoured.”⁷³ On the other hand, the exclamation of Psalm 123:3 that if God had not been with us “we would have been eaten alive,” leads Augustine to consider the manner in which the Church incorporates others into its body: not alive, but having first killed them: “Because no one enters the body of the Church without first being killed. What had been dies, so that what had not been may be.”⁷⁴ Belonging to the body of Christ, that is, involves a conversion of ways: “It is not possible to be eaten by the Church unless first killed. Let him renounce the world, then he is killed; let her have faith in God, then she is eaten.”⁷⁵

The *Enarrationes in psalmos* represent a kind of ritual structuring of the ecclesial body. The repeated practice of voicing and reflecting on the psalms produces a “body” characterized by hunger and thirst. Thus Augustine is able to compare his fasting congregation to the parched deer of Psalm 42, for “[t]he Church is hungry. Christ’s body is hungry.”⁷⁶ The psalms’ references to the flesh express a frightening vulnerability before God and the world, but it is exactly such a body to which Christ the head

⁷⁰ *En. in ps.* 30(2) s. 2.5.

⁷¹ *En. in ps.* 58 s.2.9.

⁷² *En. in ps.* 34 s.2.15.

⁷³ *En. in ps.* 43.12. On the teeth of sinners, see *En. in ps.* 3.7.

⁷⁴ *En. in ps.* 123.5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *En. in ps.* 42.1. See too other passages, esp. 61:5 (“*Cucurri in siti*”); Psalm 87:16 (“*Inops sum ego, et in laboribus a iuuentute mea*”); 139:2 (“*Exime me, Domine, ab homine maligno*”). Borgomeo also insists on the reproductive notion of the body in e.g., *En. in ps.* 52.1.

attaches himself, both in the present moment and throughout all of history. As ritual theorists have noted, the formalized practices of religion constitute a process wherein history may be appropriated. Situated in a moment of unfulfilled imperfection and recognizing that the completion of history has yet to be realized, Augustine finds in the psalms references to a long history of trials and persecutions endured by Christ's body, even before the birth of Jesus. Thus on Psalm 128:1 ("From my youth they have often opposed me"), Augustine notes that the psalms speak of opponents who have always caused the Church suffering, as if in answer to present Christians who had been wondering whether its languishing was something new.⁷⁷ Beginning with Abel, who suffered violence at the hands of his brother Cain, Augustine shows that the Church comprises all those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Not only does such an explanation appropriate this ancient history into the present trials of the Church, but it places the whole scope of that history into the experience of the one just man, who suffered in the flesh on the cross.⁷⁸

AN ECCLESIOLOGY OF GROANING

I began by suggesting that, if we are to take the "history of exegesis" seriously, then our very understanding of what "exegesis" is will be reshaped, perhaps challenged, by its actual context. The preconceptions of the historical-critical method are appropriate to its own time and place but differ significantly from the overwhelmingly oral and public nature of ancient biblical proclamation and commentary. Walter Ong's attempt to retrieve this sense of difference between a culture based primarily on spoken language and one dominated by the written word offers insight into the social dynamics operative in ancient exegesis. In the absence of any visual presence of words, spoken words retain their quality as occurrences. As one raised within a culture not far removed from orality, Augustine's approach to the psalms never loses a sense of language as being a "mode of action" and not merely a "countersign of thought."⁷⁹ The psalms them-

⁷⁷ *En. in ps.* 128.2.

⁷⁸ On the Church beginning with Abel, see *En. in ps.* 61.4 (esp. on the blood of Abel); 90 s.2.1, with discussion in Borgomeo, 30-32. See too Yves Congar, "Ecclesia ab Abel," in *Abhandlungen über Theologie und Kirche: Festschrift für Karl Adam* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1952) esp. 81-86.

⁷⁹ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Methuen, 1982) 32. Ong relies on the terms of Bronislaw Malinowski, "The problem of meaning in primitive languages," in *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and of the Science of Symbolism*, ed. I. A. Richards and C. K. Ogden (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1923) 451, 470-81.

selves comprise memorable, neatly-patterned, communally fixed and formulaic thought expressions, which add rather than subordinate, aggregate rather than analyze.⁸⁰ The verbal “redundancy,” parallelism, balance, and polysyndeton characteristic both of the psalms and of Augustine’s preaching foster an epistemology where human knowledge is empathetic and participatory and where the value of words lies not foremost in precise definition but in their “actual habitat,” including “gestures, vocal inflections, facial expressions, and the entire human, existential setting in which the real spoken word always occurs.”⁸¹ Frames of reference are situational rather than abstract, highly somatic, and very interpersonal.⁸² The desire for information, for discovery, is conceived not in terms of securing a *datum* but of forming a personal connection; personality structures are more “communal and externalized”; the act of oral communication unites people in groups.⁸³ In such a context, the “exegesis” of Augustine the rhetor will have an important socially productive quality.

Augustine’s conception of the psalms as *uox totius Christi*, however, offers a framework whose theological dynamism closely corresponds to the social dynamic. The profound Christo-ecclesiological basis of Augustine’s exegesis provides scope for seeing the productive qualities of his exegesis as part of the revelatory power of the psalms themselves. New theoretical insights sensitive to the performative and practical force of interpretation may complement, not threaten, theological values and offer new categories for considering what “Church” meant to Augustine. The attempt to place a neat neo-Scholastic grid on Augustine in order to delineate his “doctrine of the Church” resembles the now suspect attempt to impose a neo-Platonic grid on his reading of Scripture. Augustine’s mind is far too complex for this attempt at oversimplification, which foreshortens his eschatological horizon, forces premature clarity, denies the troubling depth of the ecclesial scandals in which he spent his career, and reinforces inept idealizations of what the Church actually is.

For Augustine, reflection on the Church as it is inevitably came with much groaning. At the beginning of his commentary on Psalm 42, he once more asserts the importance of hearing our own “voice” in the psalm: “We should hear the voice (of the Church) in all psalms, whether the voice is praising or groaning [*uel psallentem uel gementem*], whether it is rejoicing in hope or sighing in the present condition [*uel laetantem in spe, uel suspirantem in re*].”⁸⁴ The most common voice in this psalm, however, is that of inarticulate groaning, which reflects the distress the Church feels in present

⁸⁰ Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 33–38. ⁸¹ *Ibid.* 47.

⁸² Ong speaks of an oral culture’s “verbomotor lifestyle,” where individuals are “person-active” rather than “object-attentive” (*ibid.* 60).

⁸³ *Ibid.* 69.

⁸⁴ *En. in ps.* 42.1.

conditions: "All those who make progress and who groan for that heavenly city . . . Christ's wheat groans amid the weeds and this until the time of harvest shall come, that is, until the end of the world."⁸⁵

Of the four participles Augustine uses throughout the *Enarrationes in psalmos* to differentiate the various "voices" of the Psalms (praising, groaning, rejoicing, sighing), the "groaning" voice is most often heard.⁸⁶ The frequent tone of lament in the psalms gives rise to Augustine's recurring reference to the present reality as one in which it is only appropriate to groan. While Augustine himself may rejoice in the hope of things to come, here and now he groans.⁸⁷ The inarticulate groans of the Church communicate, not a clear idea, but a desire to be at home with God even though we recognize our general distress at our present condition. Hence, on Psalm 30:11 ("My life is imperiled by sorrow, and my years have faded amid sighs"), Augustine notes that our years on earth pass amid groaning, "*in gemitibus, non in claris uocibus* [in groans, not in clear voices]."⁸⁸ For God's true servants the groan derives from inner anguish: "He bellows because he remembers the sabbath rest, which flesh and blood do not possess."⁸⁹ Even if a servant of God may ostensibly be happy, interiorly the groaning desire reaches the ear of God.⁹⁰

In Augustine's exegesis, a variety of occasions may elicit the groans of the servant who desires the kingdom. Psalm 52, which begins with the complaint, "the impudent one has said in his heart, 'God does not exist,'" is ascribed to one "Maeleth," a name Augustine translates as "for one who labors to give birth or for someone in pain."⁹¹ Augustine explains that such is Christ's body, for whom the psalm is sung, "that unified organism whose head is on high," and which lives in a world "with iniquity increasing mightily" and where the love of many has grown cold (Matthew 24:12).⁹² Christ's body suffers and groans among those who deny God through their

⁸⁵ *En. in ps.* 42.2.

⁸⁶ A word search on the Library of Latin Texts, CLCLT-5 database (Brepols: 2002) reveals the following statistics. Although the generic *cantan** appears 65 times throughout the *En. in ps.*, the voice-specific *psallen** appears 14 times, *gemen** 47 times, *laetan** 27 times, *suspiran** 17 times. The preponderance of the voices which "groan" in Augustine's understanding of the psalms is attested throughout the *Enarrationes*. We may also note, however, that even the runner-up of this passage (*laetans*) is only a rejoicing "in hope" rather than for something achieved (*in re*). Borgomeo (178) suggests that, for Augustine, groaning is the proper voice of the Church of present times.

⁸⁷ *En. in ps.* 31(2).20. Ita . . . et gaudeo et gemo: gaudeo in spe, gemo adhuc in re.

⁸⁸ *En. in ps.* 30(2) s.2.5.

⁸⁹ *En. in ps.* 37.13.

⁹⁰ *En. in ps.* 37.14.

⁹¹ *En. in ps.* 52.1: Pro parturiente siue dolente.

⁹² *En. in ps.* 52.1.

practical disregard for good. Augustine quotes the line from Matthew (“Whoever perseveres to the end will be saved,” Matthew 24:13) to ask:

Why is persevering a great thing unless one perseveres amid troubles and trials and tribulations and scandals? For no one is commanded to endure good things. But because this psalm is spoken for the sufferer and because it is sung for him, let us see what perseverance is. For the sufferer, the psalm reproves those people among whom he groans, among whom he grieves, and at the end of the psalm, the consolation of the one who grieves and labors in birth is offered and expressed. Who are the people, therefore, among whom we labor and groan, if we are in the body of Christ. If we live under the head, if we count ourselves among his members, hear who they are.⁹³

Psalm 54 also begins with a lament: “Hear my appeal, O God, and do not disdain my prayer; pay heed to me and hear me. I am deeply saddened in my ordeal and very distressed” (Psalm 54:2). Augustine advises that the lament is “for the understanding of David himself” and tells his congregation that “understanding” refers to the Church’s assessment of the hard situation in which it finds itself and for which it prays deliverance. To seek deliverance, however, is not to seek exclusion from sinners. In his reading of the psalm, Augustine is all too aware of the temptation of the “good and holy” to give into acts of violent hatred. Indeed, “if we understand, we see that this is not a place of rejoicing but of groaning, not yet a place for exultation but still a place of lamentation.”⁹⁴ Any illusion that we can live in a place of exultation will lead a Christian to desire separation and to violate his/her fundamental duty of charity in favor of an idealization. Thus, on verse 6–7 (“Fear and trembling came upon me, and darkness covered me. And I said ‘Who will give me wings as though to a dove. Then I will fly away and find rest’”) Augustine notes that a servant of God may not simply fly away from an incorrigible “sinner,” no matter how much he or she may wish to do so.

And if the one who cannot be corrected is your own, either through fellowship in the human race or, more importantly, through ecclesial communion, if he is inside, what will you do? Where will you go? Where will you separate yourself, so that you don’t have to put up with these things? No: stay present, speak to him, exhort him, be kind to him, challenge him, rouse him.⁹⁵

Augustine explains that, like a dove, who is the very symbol of charity, the Christian is affectively attached to those from whom he or she would wish dissociation. Therefore, the dove does not fly away but stays so as to discharge its office of love and accepts those who cause it to groan: “For the dove appears as a sign of love, and in it groans are loved. There is nothing so familiar with groans as a dove; day and night it groans, as if it is placed

⁹³ *En. in ps.* 52.1.

⁹⁵ *En. in ps.* 54.8

⁹⁴ *En. in ps.* 54.3.

here where it must groan.”⁹⁶ The dove does not withdraw from others but lives after the pattern of Christ, who included among his own twelve apostles one who would cause him suffering.⁹⁷ To suffer persecution, whether the kind which the ancient martyrs encountered or that which arises on account of the scandalous weakness of others in present times, is a mark of living a devoted life like Christ in the Church. For “the Church is never free from persecutions.”⁹⁸

Indeed, there is even a certain “joy of groaning.” Psalm 101, a lament which begins: “Hear my prayer, O Lord: and let my crying come to you,” includes the verse: “I have eaten ashes as it were bread, and mingled my drink with weeping” (v. 9). For Augustine, this line refers to the Incarnation, wherein the Word becomes approachable to us by taking on frailty and mortal flesh and coming to us as one about to die.⁹⁹ Since he has united himself to our flesh, then, we can read our words in his. This event of the Word’s commingling in a mortal life of tears allows for our ultimate transformation “into the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God” (Ephesians 4:15). For now, however, while we await the fullness of such transformation, “poverty is our lot here, toil, and groaning.”¹⁰⁰ Because in Christ the Word has taken on flesh, Christ’s body, the Church, may not dissociate itself from human infirmity, “for the sake of his mercy [*gratias misericordiae ipsius*].”

How does the Word experience toil? How does it groan, the Word through whom all things were made? If he has thought fit to share in our death, will he not give to us his life? He has raised us up in great hope, when we groan in great hope. Groaning includes sadness, but there is a groaning which includes joy too. I think Sarah, who was sterile, groaned joyfully when she gave birth . . . Therefore, let us hear Christ poor in us and with us and on account of us . . . Therefore one voice, because one flesh. Let us listen and recognize ourselves too in these voices. And if we see that we are outside of him, let us toil to be within him.¹⁰¹

CONCLUSION

Augustine’s frequent reminder that we groan in the present condition suggests a form of resistance to premature solutions of the multiple problems that he faced as a fifth-century bishop. The eschatological sense, both of Scripture and of the Church, did not deliver him from real tensions or provide a way for him to escape into an overly spiritualized exegesis or

⁹⁶ *En. in ps.* 54.8: Columba enim pro signo dilectionis ponitur, et in ea gemitus amatur. Nihil tam amicis gemitibus quam columba; die noctuque gemit, tamquam hic posita ubi gemendum est.

⁹⁷ *En. in ps.* 54.9.

⁹⁹ *En. in ps.* 101 s.1.2.

¹⁰¹ *En. in ps.* 101 s.1.2

⁹⁸ *En. in ps.* 54.8.

¹⁰⁰ *En. in ps.* 101 s.1.2.

ecclesiology. Rather, it urged patience with pains of disagreement, the effects of scandal, the bonds with those who cause us grief and embarrassment. His practice of exegesis, finally, was a practice of charity. Both were firmly grounded in his conviction that central to God's revelation was the Word's sharing in the vulnerability of our flesh, the Head's involvement with a body whose complications he did not abandon. Members of a 21st-century Church, faced with its own complications and seeking in Scripture some mooring, would do well to see in Augustine's "ecclesiology of groaning" a salutary warning against the temptation to seek some idealized community of the perfect or to employ strategies for scriptural exegesis that throws off the burdens and ambiguities and disagreements in the body which the Head in fact assumed and transfigured in himself.