

Preaching on Laughter: The Theology of Laughter in Augustine's Sermons

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Abstract

Although Augustine never wrote a treatise on laughter, a clear theology of laughter emerges from a systematic engagement with his *Sermones ad populum* and his *Enarrationes in Psalmos*. Revising previous scholarship on Augustine's theology of laughter, this article provides extensive evidence to argue that Augustine had a nuanced, sympathetic notion of laughter, understanding it as a human good subject to moral evaluation, and as a theological symbol for salvation and the triumph of Christ's mercy over the wicked's mockery.

Keywords

Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, laughter, *Sermones ad populum*, sermons

James Martin opens his book *Between Heaven and Mirth* with a telling anecdote about a Jesuit friend of his named Mike who, when in formation, went to manifest his conscience to his superior after a prolonged bout of comic mischief in the community: “‘Father,’ he said, ‘I confess excessive levity.’ The priest glowered at Mike, paused, and said, ‘All levity is excessive.’”¹ For many contemporary scholars of

1. James Martin, *Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor, and Laughter Are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Harper One, 2011) 2.

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laughter, Martin's curmudgeonly old Jesuit represents the entire Christian response to the question of laughter: the Gospels never show Jesus laughing, Augustine "and all other church fathers" condemn it,² the medievals see the "true saint" as a "sad and melancholic figure,"³ and the present Church is "shivering and oppressed by the cold front of authoritarianism" that shuts all humor out of the Christian life.⁴

Certain aspects of the early Christian treatment of laughter seem to make these negative claims credible. Neil Adkin characterizes Jerome as being wholly opposed to laughter, condemning it not only in bishops and ascetics, but in ordinary Christians as well.⁵ Adkin says that other early Christian writers, like Origen and Cassian, more moderately conclude that refraining from laughter is a sign of virtue that should be encouraged.⁶ Karl-Josef Kuschel and Stephen Halliwell cite abundant evidence of John Chrysostom's distaste for laughter as unbecoming of the true Christian.⁷ Likewise, M. A. Screech points out that the highly influential work of Pseudo-Chrysostom, the *Opus imperfectum in Matthaem*, contains strong condemnations of laughter.⁸ This list could be greatly expanded. So does Martin's stern formator accurately represent the patristic concept of laughter after all?

Although analyzing the complete narrative of laughter in the early Christian mentality is beyond the scope of my current project, one can find a more complete sense of the Christian meaning of laughter by examining Augustine's writings. Although Augustine never explicitly articulates a theology of laughter, a coherent understanding of the phenomenon emerges from his sermons.⁹ In its most quotidian sense, laughter

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2. Joost van Neer, "Didactically Responsible Use of Humour in St. Augustine's *Sermo* 53,12–14," *Augustiniana* 54 (2004) 551–58, at 551.
 3. Hans Geybels, "The Redemptive Power of Humour in Religion," in *Humour and Religion: Challenges and Ambiguities*, ed. Hans Geybels and Walter Van Herck (New York: Continuum, 2011) 11–21, at 14.
 4. Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Laughter: A Theological Reflection* (New York: Continuum, 1994) xi.
 5. Neil Adkin, "The Fathers on Laughter," *Orpheus* 6 (1985) 149–52, at 149–50.
 6. Ibid. 50.
 7. Kuschel, *Laughter* 47; Stephen Halliwell, *Greek Laughter: A Study of Cultural Psychology from Homer to Early Christianity* (New York: Cambridge University, 2008) 495–512.
 8. M. A. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1999) 48.
 9. Although Augustine uses various words for laughter more than 1,000 times throughout his corpus, for the moment I limit my study to his *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (which mostly consists of sermons and some homiletic notes on individual psalms) and his *Sermones ad populum*, as he calls them in *Retractationes* II, *epilogus*. I have identified 229 discrete passages concerning laughter in his body of sermons, including both the *Sermones ad populum* and the *Enarrationes*. All statistical data and Latin citations in this article come from the database *Library of Latin Texts: CLCLT 7, Series A*, Brepols and Centre Traditio Litterarum Occidentalium, moderante Paul Tombeur (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2010). Regarding the decision to focus on Augustine's sermons, see John Cavadini, "Simplifying Augustine," in *Educating People of Faith: Exploring the History of Jewish*

is simply an inherent part of the human person, and is subject to the same moral reflection as any other pleasure; but in its fullest sense, laughter expresses the dynamic of salvation, as a symbol of the temporal convergence and eternal divergence of the way of the wicked and the way of the just. The theological importance of laughter is especially clear when Christ is its object, as when the wicked laughed at Christ the Head in his earthly life, and laugh at Christ the Body now;¹⁰ or its agent, as when Christ the Head laughs from heaven at the wicked, and Christ the Body laughs at them on earth. To understand Augustine's theology of laughter, we will first look at laughter's place in daily life, then examine Christ as the object and agent of laughter.

Laughter in Daily Life

Before turning to the symbolic value of laughter in Augustine's thought, I wish first to take laughter at face value, exploring its place in human nature and in daily life. When speaking generally about the human condition, Augustine offers strong characterizations of laughter that understandably have left some scholars convinced of his unqualified opposition to laughter on earth. Simply by observing newborn babies, he argues, we can learn that the lot of human beings is more fitted to tears than to laughter; right after birth, "the baby itself bears witness to its wretchedness by crying. . . . It doesn't begin with laughter, it begins with a wail."¹¹ The babe "could just as well have laughed," but tears come first.¹² In this way the child becomes "a prophet of its own future misfortunes," which beset all human beings who live "in the midst of trials and temptations."¹³ The way a child begins its life outside the womb typifies the miserable

and Christian Communities, ed. John van Engen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004) 63–84. Cavadini analyzes the sermons as a privileged locus of Augustine's spontaneous thought, presenting "faith as an orientation to understanding" (84) for people of all educational backgrounds. Given the universality of laughter as a phenomenon, Augustine's presentation of the subject for such a diverse group gives us a sense of the practical and theoretical aspects of his concept of laughter.

10. The distinction between Christ as Head and the Church as Christ the Body is central for much of Augustine's theology, stemming in large part from his regular use of Tychonius's first rule for scriptural exegesis, namely, that the Scriptures can be read in the light of Christ and his Body, considered either separately or as the "whole Christ." See *De doctrina christiana* 3.30.42 and 3.31.44 (CCSL 32.102, 104). This image is structural for the *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, and is found throughout his work. The seminal treatment of this concept is Michael Fiedrowicz, *Psalmus vox totius Christi: Studien zu Augustins "Enarrationes in Psalmos"* (Freiburg: Herder, 1997), the major outline of which he has published in condensed form in English as the general introduction to the *WSA* translation of the *Enarrationes*, *WSA* III/15 13–66.
11. *S.* 293.10 (PL 38.1333) *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (hereafter *WSA*), trans. and notes Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City, 1990–), *WSA* III/8 156.
12. *En. Ps.* 125.10 (CCSL 40.1852), *WSA*, trans. and notes Maria Boulding III/20 79.
13. *S.* 167.1.1 (PL 38.910), Hill, *WSA* III/5 212. See also *S.* 293.10 (PL 38.1333).

state of postlapsarian man: "From the very moment Adam fell, and was driven out of paradise," he says, "there have never been any days that weren't evil."¹⁴ Perhaps, then, weeping is more appropriate to the human condition than laughing. Augustine seems to draw this conclusion quite openly, arguing that "as long as we are in this world, we should not laugh, lest we have occasion to weep later. . . . The time for laughter is saved up for the future."¹⁵ The particular convictions that human life on earth is to be marked by weeping and that laughter is to be postponed to heaven also mark the writing and preaching of other theological luminaries in the early centuries of the Christian era. Jerome, for instance, maintains that "now is the time for weeping, and the future for laughing."¹⁶ Likewise, John Chrysostom states that this world "is not the theatre of laughter; we have come together not to burst out into guffaws but to groan with grief."¹⁷ Basil of Caesarea makes these injunctions even stronger, insisting in his monastic *Rule* that it is "never . . . permissible to laugh at all" on the earth.¹⁸ Even in heaven the laughter that Christ speaks of in Luke 6:21 will mean not a physical event but "the pure joyfulness that is unmixed with any trace of scowling looks."¹⁹

Responding to strong statements like these, we can readily understand why previous commentators on the Church Fathers' theory of laughter in general and Augustine's in particular have emphasized the division between "false" worldly laughter and "true" heavenly laughter.²⁰ Joost van Neer goes so far as to argue that "the ultimate true laughter," for Augustine, "has nothing to do with humour and cannot even be known

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14. S. 167.1.1 (PL 38, 909), Hill, *WSA* III/5 212. For an extended discussion of this theme, with particular reference to a similar passage in *De Trinitate* XIII.7.10 (CCSL 50A.394), see Joost van Neer, "Some Observations on Augustine on Laughter," *Augustiniana* 56 (2006) 81–92.
 15. *En. Ps.* 51.13 (CCSL 39.632–33), Boulding, *WSA* III/17 25–26.
 16. Jerome, *In Ecc.* 3.4 (PL 23.1035). All uncited translations are mine. For more references to Jerome on laughter, see Adkin, "Fathers on Laughter" 149–50.
 17. John Chrysostom, *In Mt.* 6.6–8 (PG 57.69–72), quoted and trans. in Halliwell, *Greek Laughter* 504.
 18. Basil, *Reg. brev.* 31, quoted and trans. in *ibid.* 513.
 19. Basil, *Hom. de grat. act.* 31.228, quoted and trans. in *ibid.* 516.
 20. On the Church Fathers in general see Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 68. Halliwell proposes a New Testament interpretation of laughter that he believes is the "leitmotif" for especially Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, and Basil of Caesarea: "Laughter, as a metonym for the soul's elation, is here displaced from the current life of the body onto the spiritualised joy of an eternal afterlife" (*Greek Laughter*, 471–519, at 476, see 483). Irwin Resnick never mentions Augustine, but points out that later medieval laughter theorists (e.g., Peter the Chanter and Hugh of St. Victor) tend to be more explicit about forbidding laughter in the present age ("Risus Monasticus: Laughter and Medieval Monastic Culture," *Revue Bénédictine* 97 [1987] 90–100, at 100). On Augustine in particular, see Kuschel, *Laughter* 45–48; and van Neer, "Augustine on Laughter" 81–92. Philip Burton, however, never loses sight of the possibility for laughter both on earth and in heaven when discussing Augustine's theory of laughter (*Language in the Confessions*

in this life. It belongs to the life to come. From this argument it follows that all laughter in this life is false and a sign of irrationality, and thus should be avoided.”²¹

And yet, a closer reading of Augustine’s sermons reveals that this wholly negative portrayal of laughter is a problematic simplification. However much the world may be fit for groaning and weeping rather than laughing, Augustine recognizes that not every moment of the Christian’s life is spent in mourning: “Sometimes a servant of God may be seen laughing: does this mean that desire [for God] is dead in such a person’s heart? No; and if desire is in him, groaning is in him too; it does not always reach human ears, but it never fails to reach the ears of God.”²² This is an important qualification of the apparent rejection of ordinary laughter that we saw earlier. Here Augustine is clear that a Christian is perfectly capable of laughing while inwardly longing for God and groaning for the fulfillment of his kingdom. The conclusion of the passage also suggests that what human beings may be tempted to dismiss or criticize as mere worldly laughter can be, to God’s ears, the very manifestation of the desire and groaning for heavenly things that others may express by weeping. Moreover, Augustine positively commends laughter in various ways. He says that those who boast in temporal goods are “to be laughed at,”²³ and that Christians are set free by their love of God to “deride the whole world.”²⁴ In more mundane situations, he recognizes that sometimes the best response to a bad argument is laughter: when showing the uselessness of appeals to authority, he says, “Suppose I were to say to you today, ‘You have to believe this, because Cicero said it, Plato said it, Pythagoras said it,’ wouldn’t you all laugh at me?”²⁵ Likewise,

suppose someone said of the letter D, “It ought not to be used as the initial of the devil’s name,” and you asked, “Why not?” and he replied, “Because I have read that letter in God’s name.” Such a person would be judged quite uncouth, ignorant of both human and divine custom. He or she would simply be laughed at; you would not even bother to argue with a person like that.²⁶

The above quotations present a rather different image of laughter. Augustine corrects the misapprehension that one who laughs cannot be a genuine Christian, and provides

of Augustine [New York: Oxford University, 2007] 169–71). Catherine Conybeare proposes an interesting analysis of Augustine’s discussion of Abraham and Sarah’s laughter in *De Civitate Dei* 16.26, arguing that at least in that passage he sees their laughter foreshadowing the grace that will set the Christian people free in the new covenant, thereby suggesting an Old Testament–New Testament distinction between false and true laughter, possibly based in an earth–heaven distinction (*The Laughter of Sarah: Biblical Exegesis, Feminist Theory, and the Concept of Delight* [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013] 35–36).

21. Van Neer, “Didactically Responsible Use of Humour” 583.

22. *En. Ps.* 37.14 (CCSL 38.392), Boulding, *WSA* III/16 158.

23. *En. Ps.* 58.2.5 (CCSL 39.749).

24. *En. Ps.* 63.16 (CCSL 39.818).

25. *En. Ps.* 103.3.6 (CCSL 40.1504), Boulding, *WSA* III/19 147.

26. *En. Ps.* 103.3.22 (CCSL 40.1519), Boulding, *WSA* III/19 164.

a number of circumstances in which laughter is the most appropriate response to a given situation. In these passages, laughter is part of daily life for all people, Christians included.

So what are we to make of these two seemingly contradictory characterizations of laughter? Is laughter perpetually forestalled until the eschaton, or is it an ordinary part of daily human life? To see how Augustine resolves this apparent paradox, we must examine his anthropology of laughter.

Although Augustine never provides an extensive examination of laughter as a part of the human person, key insights into his understanding of laughter emerge from his sermons and elsewhere. His remarks about babies' early days have important implications for his understanding of the nature of laughter. He observes that newborn babies may "begin by crying," but "they are also capable of laughing," even if they are able to exercise that faculty only after some days outside the womb.²⁷ The capacity for laughter is present at least potentially from the first days of human life. As such, it is a part of human nature, one that stems from humanity's rationality²⁸ and is closely related to the power of language.²⁹ Far from being a sign of irrationality, for Augustine, laughter presupposes rationality. I noted above that only a rational person is able to laugh at bad arguments and superstitious statements, while the less rational are unable to see the joke. Likewise, when someone says something flagrantly irrational, the listener naturally assumes that the speaker is "either joking or insane."³⁰ In the latter case, there is no joke and thereby no fodder for laughter, but only concern for the mad person. As he explains, "if you saw someone with a high fever laughing, you would weep over his loss of his wits."³¹ The sick or mad who laugh invert the ordinary meaning of laughter and so provoke pity and tears; their gesture is only physically the same as true laughter, and is devoid of the rationality that provokes genuine laughter.

The embryonic anthropology of laughter discernible in Augustine's sermons is also confirmed in one of his treatises: "But there are," he argues, "other things which apparently do not pertain to animal life, though even in man they are not his highest endowments, such as the power to jest and laugh."³² Here Augustine neatly outlines the anthropological place of laughter. It is something that humans are capable of that

27. S. 167.1.1 (PL 38.909), Hill, *WSA* III/5 212.

28. *Ratio* and its relation to the human mind is, of course, a complex question in Augustine's thought, and one that develops throughout his career. For a valuable treatment of the subject, with some fruitful insights into its relation to laughter, see Catherine Conybeare, *The Irrational Augustine* (New York: Oxford University, 2006).

29. Burton, *Language in the Confessions* 167.

30. *En. Ps.* 48.2.7 (CCSL 38.571). See S. 26D/198.17 (François Dolbeau, *Augustin d'Hippone, Vingt-six sermons au peuple d'Afrique*, 1996 [*Etudes Augustiniennes, Antiquité* 147] 380).

31. S. 250.2 (SChr 116.314), Hill, *WSA* III/7 122. This analogy will assume greater importance below, where I consider laughter in its symbolic mode.

32. *De libero arbitrio* I.8.18 (CCSL 29.223), van Neer, "Didactically Responsible Use of Humour" 579.

beasts are not. Laughter, however, is subordinated to humanity's "highest endowments," whereby God is contemplated by grace. The power of laughter is one of God's gifts to humanity, and even if it is not the most exalted of those gifts, it has a dignity of its own because of its tie to human nature and rationality.

Augustine is well aware, however, that the wounds of original sin have affected the human capacity for laughter, just as they affected other aspects of the soul, like the senses or the emotions. Laughter can be used well or poorly, in excess or moderation, fittingly or unfittingly, generously or cruelly, morally or immorally. Augustine recognizes that the laughter that is a part of ordinary human interactions cannot be either wholly condemned or wholly praised; instead he views laughter as a normal part of the human moral life, and proposes commonsense recommendations for how to use it appropriately. Because it is so fundamentally connected to human rationality, Augustine never even considers the possibility that laughter could be sinful in itself.³³ Laughter, like language, remains a natural good, and one that cannot be suppressed without doing real harm to human nature.

In essence, Augustine says that laughter bespeaks the pleasures of human life and is susceptible of the same moral calculus as any other human activity. "What I mean by daily sins," he says, "are those that are easily committed by the tongue, such as an unkind word, or when someone gives way to excessive laughter, or daily trivialities of that sort."³⁴ There is "no great blame attached" to lying in jest, even if it is "not without blame." In the same passage Augustine reconsiders whether a jocular lie can count as a lie—and so incur any blame—at all, since "that which has no duplicity at its heart cannot even be called a lie."³⁵ Jests and laughter cross over into immorality only when they turn into "wicked games" or "offensive jokes,"³⁶ or the frivolities particular to pagan rituals.³⁷

Augustine is extremely forgiving of slight lapses in moral judgment about laughter, as with small excesses in other basic pleasures. When laughter exceeds the bounds of due moderation and one gives in to "vain guffaws," he ranks this sin on a par with "talking about other people's affairs and business, which don't concern you" and the pleasurable goods like eating, drinking, and even hearing that humanity is prone to abuse in minor ways.³⁸ These faults are to be offered to God in repentance, lest inattention in minor matters lead to inattention in major ones, and

33. Cf. van Neer, "Didactically Responsible Use of Humour" 578, where he makes the unsubstantiated claim that Augustine, "like all Christians," "sees laughter as proof of irrationality and weakness of character."

34. S. 9.18 (CCSL 41.143), Hill, *WSA* III/1 276.

35. *En. Ps.* 5.7 (CCSL 38.22), Boulding, *WSA* III/15 98.

36. S. 196.4 (PL 38.1021), Hill, *WSA* III/6 63.

37. S. 293B.5 (MiAg 1.231) warns especially against participating in *ioca uanitatum* associated with pagan rituals.

38. S. 351.3.5 (PL 39.1541), Hill, adapted, *WSA* III/10 125. His mild response to *uanis cachinnationibus* is particularly striking, given that Jerome uses the word *cachinnus* to signify the kind of laughter he finds most inexcusable. See Adkin, "Fathers on Laughter" 149.

they are expiated simply by almsgiving or reciting the Lord's Prayer.³⁹ Augustine, however, sees a particular role for mockery and its resulting shame in correcting human behavior, insofar as Augustine says he was personally aided by being "mocked and shamed" out of his pride.⁴⁰ Such mocking laughter becomes dangerous only if done without honest desire to correct and charity for the offender.⁴¹ Augustine's preaching about laughter does not lead to excoriation, but rather to moral exhortation; he admonishes his congregants to confess to God only when "I have laughed more than I ought."⁴² Augustine sees that the laughter of normal human communication should be used like any other earthly good, directed to God by a well-ordered desire. Even at his most severe, Augustine only admonishes virgins to stay away from "wanton laughter" and "scurrilous jokes,"⁴³ and never forbids them the ordinary use of laughter. Significantly, Augustine's mild caution about laughter does not appear in any of his sermons, but rather in a treatise on virginity, where the audience would presumably be expecting stricter behavioral codes than the general Christian populace.

Nor should we be surprised that Augustine is so open to laughter, given his frequent use of humor in his own writings. His sermons contain occasional jokes and references to his congregation's laughter. One memorable interchange involves numerical hyperbole, creative mathematics, and giggling altar boys. After a spate of clotted numerical symbols, he explains:

When these seven are added, they make ten. What's that I've said? It sounds ridiculous: when seven are added to ten, they make ten; as though I'd forgotten how to count. So I ought to have said, "When seven are added to ten, they make seventeen." Everybody knows that; I mean, when I said, "When seven are added to ten, they make ten," didn't these boys here start laughing at me? And yet I do say it, and I repeat it, and I'm not ashamed of it. When you understand, you won't find fault with my arithmetic, instead you will love my logic.⁴⁴

This delightful passage shows Augustine, in an apparently spontaneous moment, including the incredulous laughter of his hearers into his argument by using their

39. *S. 57.12.12 (Homo Spiritualis: Festgabe für Luc Verheijen OSA zu seinem 70. Geburtstag [Würzburg: Augustinus, 1987] 423)*; the disputed conclusion of *S. 393 (PL 39.1714–15)* is less nuanced, and calls daily sins like laughter simultaneously "light" and "grave and deadly" because they may lead to presumption.

40. *En. Ps. 24.2 (CCSL 38.137)*.

41. *En. Ps. 49.26 (CCSL 38.443)*; *S. 61A.6 (RB 79.183)*; *S. 205.2 (PL 38.1040)*.

42. *S. 57.12.12 (Homo Spiritualis 423)*, Hill, *WSA III/3 116*. Augustine makes an even stronger case in the treatise *De natura et gratia 38.45 (CSEL 60.265)*, where he says that even the just man Abel would have occasionally laughed and joked excessively; this implies that he ordinarily would have laughed and joked just enough.

43. *De sancta virginitate 53.54 (CSEL 41.299)*. See Adkin, "Fathers on Laughter" 152, n. 8, where he cites this passage as an "explicit prohibition of laughter."

44. *S. 249.3 (PL 38.1163)*, Hill, *WSA III/7 119*. See also Hill's note on this passage, *ibid*. See van Neer, "Didactically Responsible Use of Humour" 551–88.

disbelief at his seeming arithmetical error to set the stage for a rhetorically and theologically complex point about grace, the Law, and the Holy Spirit.⁴⁵

On another occasion, Augustine seems less enthusiastic about his congregation's laughter: having interpreted Psalm 44's headnote "the children of Korah" to mean "the children of the bald man," he responds to what appears to be laughter at the unexpected bathos of the word "bald," saying,

You must not think that funny. We do not want to be like those tittering boys with their childish minds, whom we read about in the Book of the Kingdoms. They mocked the prophet Elisha by shouting after him, *Off you go, baldy, off you go, baldy!* Those silly, prattling children jeered at him to their own destruction, for wild beasts came out of the woods and devoured them. . . . So it came about that they were devoured by wild animals, and represented people who with the same childish attitude mocked at a certain man who could be called "bald" [*calvus*] because he was crucified at a place named Calvary [*calvaria*].⁴⁶

Nevertheless, during another sermon on the same subject, Augustine shows himself willing to use the comic value of the term "bald" precisely to get his listeners' attention, so that he can give the same typological interpretation of Elisha and Christ:

Many Hebrew names have been interpreted for us, and when we investigate the meaning of this one we find that "Korah" is equivalent to "bald"; Ah, that alerted you, didn't it? . . . Who are these children of the bald man? Could they perhaps be the children of the Bridegroom? Yes, that's it, because the Bridegroom was crucified at a place called "Calvary."⁴⁷

Laughter, even during a sermon, is not in itself a concern for Augustine; he is not interested in stamping it out of his congregation, or in pandering to it. Rather, he is able to

45. Augustine's other writings also confirm his commitment to the goodness of laughter as a means of sharpening his audience's attention when directed appropriately. Catherine Conybeare has convincingly demonstrated that Augustine uses laughter as a literary device in his Cassiciacum dialogues, creating emotional intimacy and propelling crucial arguments toward Christ without offending the not-quite-Christian sensibilities of his early readers and patrons. See Conybeare, *Irrational Augustine*, esp. 9–59. Philip Burton has also indicated how Augustine in the *Confessions* frequently describes people using humorously derisive theatrical and literary comic tropes, only to reveal that God has turned the comic order upside down, making saints out of fools by the scandal of the cross. See Burton, *Language in the Confessions*, esp. 39–62. Laughter, as a part of human nature, can be used for good or for ill, both on the part of the one laughing and the person provoking the laughter; as a master rhetorician and a faithful Christian, Augustine strove to use the faculty of laughter to preach the Word of God, from both the pulpit and his desk.

46. *En. Ps.* 44.1 (CCSL 38.493–4), Boulding, *WSA* III/16 281–82.

47. *En. Ps.* 46.2 (CCSL 38.529–30), Boulding, *WSA* III/16 325.

adapt freely to his congregation's laughter, correcting it when he finds it out of place and directing it to fruitful theological and rhetorical aims when appropriate.⁴⁸

With such a nuanced and generally positive view of well-ordered laughter, then, we can legitimately wonder how the passage we saw earlier identifying laughter as a solely eschatological reality can be harmonized with the whole of Augustine's perspective on the question. One resolution is to say that this one eschatological text is an outlier that is not representative of Augustine's wider theology of laughter. Another approach is to see that, in the context of *En. Ps.* 51.13, Augustine is not in fact discussing laughter in its ordinary, daily sense, but has already crossed into speaking about laughter as symbolic of the dynamic of salvation, whereby Christ the Body shares in the mockery that Christ the Head received on the cross, and whereby the Body shares in the laughter that the Head enjoys in heaven. This symbolic, salvific dimension of laughter may begin on earth, but is not fully realized until after the end of time: in this sense, only after Judgment Day do we enjoy the time of perfect laughter. It is to this notion of laughter that I now turn.

Christ and Laughter

In addition to the moral significance that Augustine derives from the quotidian face of laughter, he sees that laughter takes on new theological dimensions when it is applied to Christ. In the rest of this article, I explore how considering Christ as either the object or agent of laughter enables laughter to symbolize the dynamic of salvation and humanity's various responses to it. Throughout his sermons, Augustine extends the hermeneutic he thematizes in the *Enarrationes in Psalmos* between Christ the Head and Christ the Body, creating an implicit theology of laughter by applying that same hermeneutic to the various kinds of laughter that Christianity provokes. When Christ is considered the object of laughter, the fate of the Head and the fate of the Body are intimately associated: "*They sneered at me with derision. That is, they mocked me and insulted me: as with the Head, so with the Body.*"⁴⁹ Likewise, the

48. Augustine's rhetorical ease with laughter contrasts markedly with the more strident tone of John Chrysostom, who frequently anticipates his listeners' laughter and scolds them for it: "Perhaps there are some of you so dissipated and frivolous as actually to laugh in the face of this rebuke, at the very fact that laughter is the subject of this discussion" (John Chrysostom, *In ep. Hebr.* 15.4 [PG 63, 121–24], quoted and trans. in Halliwell, *Greek Laughter* 508). Again, apparently responding to an outburst of laughter, Chrysostom laments, "The devil is dancing everywhere, he has got inside everyone" (ibid.). Such language is wholly absent in Augustine's sermons; even when Augustine scolds his listeners for inappropriate laughter, he never condemns the idea of laughing, even in church, and is often enough willing to take advantage of his audience's laughter.

49. *En. Ps.* 34.2.8 (CCSL 38.317). Unless otherwise noted, italicized portions of quotations from Augustine are biblical quotations, in keeping with the conventions of the *WSA* series. For consistency's sake, I maintain that practice even when, as here, the translation is my own.

Body and the Head are mutually implicated when Christ is considered the agent of laughter: commenting on “He who sits in the heavens laughs; the LORD has them in derision” (Ps 2:4, RSV), a line he connects to Christ, Augustine says that “if we understand heaven to be the souls of the saints, it is through them that God, who knows quite well in advance what is to happen, will deride and mock his enemies.”⁵⁰ These two passages suggest the latent theological understanding of laughter that Augustine develops through his sermons: laughter is a symbol for the way Christians share in the sufferings and triumph of Christ by being conformed to Christ the Head as members of his Body. Laughter is thereby a privileged locus for understanding Augustine’s theology of the whole Christ.

Laughter at Christ the Head

An inescapable historical and scriptural locus for Christian perspectives on laughter is the bystanders’ mockery of the crucified Christ, when disbelieving humanity heaped scorn upon the Son of God who, incarnate, was dying for their salvation. Augustine returns to this theme at least 31 times in his sermons, often narrating a litany of indignities that Christ endured for the love of humankind.⁵¹ The following is a representative example:

And the Lord of heaven and earth, creator of angels, maker and founder of all things visible and invisible, sucks, cries, is reared, grows, endures his life, conceals his majesty, later on is arrested, scorned, scourged, mocked, spat at, slapped, crowned with thorns, hung on a tree, pierced with a lance. What poverty! There is the head of the poor people I am looking for.⁵²

Christ the Head made himself supremely poor in order to make poor sinners rich in heaven, yet he found only death and mockery. This shocking contrast opens a vast horizon of theological reflection on the meaning of laughter.

For Augustine, the mockery on the cross is an iconic confrontation of human ignorance and divine knowledge, human cruelty and divine mercy, human arrogance and divine humility, death and life, and even the devil and God. The “mocked cross” was

50. *En. Ps.* 2.3 (CCSL 38.4), Boulding, *WSA* III/15 72–73.

51. *En. Ps.* 21.1.8 (CCSL 38.118); *En. Ps.* 21.2.1, 9, 23 (CCSL 38.121–2, 125–26, 128); *En. Ps.* 46.7 (CCSL 38.533); *En. Ps.* 49.6 (CCSL 38.580); *En. Ps.* 56.16 (CCSL 39:706); *En. Ps.* 62.20 (CCSL 39:807); *En. Ps.* 67.3, 30 (CCSL 39.870, 890–91); *En. Ps.* 74.9 (CCSL 39.1031–32); *En. Ps.* 75.10 (CCSL 39.1044); *En. Ps.* 93.8 (CCSL 39.1309); *En. Ps.* 103.3.25 (CCSL 40.1520); *En. Ps.* 108.5 (CCSL 40.1587); *En. Ps.* 134.22 (CCSL 40.1953); *En. Ps.* 138.8 (CCSL 40.1996–97); *S.* 14.9 (CCSL 41.190–91); *S.* 19.4 (CCSL 41.255); *S.* 45.5 (CCSL 41.520); *S.* 51.1.2 (RB 91.24); *S.* 80.5 (PL 38.497); *S.* 91.1.1 (PL 38.567); *S.* 106.2.3–3.3 (PL 38.626); *S.* 110.3 (MiAg 1.643); *S.* 111.2 (RB 57.113); *S.* 113A.14 (MiAg 1.154); *S.* 221.1 (SChr 116.210); *S.* 299.4 (PL 38.1370); *S.* 308A.7 (MiAg 1.48); *S.* 317.2.2 (PL 38.1436); *S.* 342.1 (PL 39.1501); *S.* 25D/360B.24 (Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons* 265); *S.* 369.2 (RB 79.125).

52. *S.* 14.9 (CCSL 41.190–91), Hill, adapted, *WSA* III/1 322.

the epitomizing moment for human self-confidence over and against God.⁵³ Human beings blinded by their own convictions mocked and crucified Jesus, “and the crucified was making an eye-salve for them from his blood;”⁵⁴ the all-powerful Lord was mocked as weak;⁵⁵ the victorious king was “mocked by the bystanders as though they were the victors.”⁵⁶

Humanity's mockery of the cross is a sign of the radical transcendence of God, who remains outside the realm of human understanding even in the person of the God-man; Jesus became “a sign that was mocked” by the deluded self-confidence of human beings sunk in sin “in order to be honored” by those who would later accept him in faith.⁵⁷ Christians still remember with fear and trembling the mockery of those who crucified Christ, not because the people on Calvary that day were uniquely wicked—after all, as Augustine is fond of quoting, “if they had [understood], they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2:8, RSV)—but because the collective jeering laughter is a sign of the limits of human knowing, a painful awakening to the reality of human finitude in the face of divine infinity. Without the grace of faith, all human knowledge is merely darkness scoffing at the light.⁵⁸ The tragedy of human weakness and ignorance remains as real for people today as it was for those who laughed at the crucified man from Nazareth, and remains as disconcerting now as it was then.

Laughter at Christ the Body

The laughter that sinful humanity directs at Christ is not limited to the historical event of the cross, but spills over into mockery of Christ the Body. When Christians suffer insults, scorn, persecutions, and even death on account of their union with Christ, they experience the cruel laughter that Jesus underwent, albeit in a different mode. As one might expect from the bishop of an embattled church, Augustine speaks more about this kind of laughter than any other, addressing it at least 89 times in his preaching. When those who profess the name of Christ are mocked by the wicked, the unity of Christ and Christians, Head and Body, is revealed in a particularly keen way:

Remember how Christians were hounded out of every refuge, and how wherever they were discovered they were mocked, beaten, killed, thrown to the beasts and burnt; and remember how people made merry at their expense. What had happened to the Head happened to the body too. What had been done to the crucified Lord was done to his body as well throughout the persecution of former days. But persecution has not ceased even now. Wherever they find a Christian they make a point of insulting him or her; they taunt Christians, call them doltish, dull, lily-livered, good for nothing. But let them do what they will: Christ is in heaven. Let

53. S. 51.1.2 (RB 91.24).

54. S. 317.2.2 (PL 38.1436), Hill, *WSA* III/9 144.

55. S. 110.3 (MiAg 1.643).

56. S. 111.2 (RB 57.113), Hill, *WSA* III/4 142.

57. S. 342.1 (PL 39.1501), Hill, *WSA* III/10 35.

58. S. 308A.7 (MiAg 1.48).

them do what they will: he has made his punishment glorious, and planted his cross on the brows of all.⁵⁹

Augustine's enumeration of the ills that befall Christians at the hands of the wicked parallels his description of what Christ endured during his Passion. Augustine is aware that the conformation to Christ that comes from persecution can come through the particular combination of mockery and violence that Christ suffered—such is the fate of the martyrs.⁶⁰ But he emphasizes the conformity to Christ that comes about through insults, mockery, and the laughter of the wicked; this is a universal means by which Christians participate in Christ's Passion, even if they are not called upon to shed their blood.

In his sermons Augustine highlights the cruel laughter of the wicked at the suffering Body of the Church in order to teach his listeners that conformity to the mocked and crucified Christ is not merely reserved for the martyrs, but is a royal path to salvation open to all, realized through the patient endurance of unjust laughter. The “devil and his angels” “wish to ridicule our infirmities and our weakness”; this is for us an opportunity to let our voice “cry out in the members of Christ, subordinate to their head in heaven.”⁶¹ The unity of Christ's Body with the Head is thus the cause and the result of mocking laughter, as the wicked mock Christians because of their similarity to the humiliated Christ on the cross. Christians grow in that similarity through the graced suffering of laughter in imitation of Christ. Those who live out their faith in Christ by following the commandments and preaching him crucified will inevitably be mocked by the wicked.⁶² “I cannot avoid being mocked by them,” Augustine says,⁶³ but for Christians false laughter is not merely a cause of torment; it can also be a cause for rejoicing in closeness to God: “Is there any of the faithful who would not welcome such curses?”⁶⁴

Moreover, when we consider the mockery of Christ's Body from the side of those who mock, the eschatological and salvific dimension of laughter stands out in stark negative relief. I mentioned earlier that the literal laughter of a mad person is a false simulacrum that helps illumine the true nature of laughter by contrast. Speaking symbolically, Augustine frequently turns to the image of the laughing mad person to explain the emptiness of the wicked's mockery.⁶⁵ All humans are sick with sin and

59. *En. Ps.* 34.2.8 (CCSL 38.317–8), Boulding, *WSA* III/16 67.

60. *En. Ps.* 43.14 (CCSL 38.486); *S.* 286.4.3 (PL 38.1298).

61. *En. Ps.* 58.1.4 (CCSL 39.732), Boulding, altered, *WSA* III/17 152.

62. *En. Ps.* 79.7 (CCSL 39.1114); *En. Ps.* 91.14 (CCSL 39.1289); *En. Ps.* 136.9 (CCSL 40.1970); *S.* 9.12 (CCSL 41.131); *S.* 113A.1 (MiAg 1.141); *S.* 150.8.9 (PL 38.812); *S.* 160.3 (PL 38.874); *S.* 167.3.4 (PL 38.911)

63. *En. Ps.* 38.15 (CCSL 38.416). See *En. Ps.* 122.8 (CCSL 40.1820).

64. *S.* 286.4.3 (PL 38, 1298), Hill, *WSA* III/8 104.

65. *En. Ps.* 141.9 (CCSL 40.2052); *S.* 31.4, 6 (CCSL 41.395); *S.* 80.4 (PL 38.495); *S.* 99.7 (PL 38.599); *S.* 150.8.10 (PL 38.813); *S.* 174.5.6 (PL 38.943); *S.* 175.2.2 (PL 38.945–6); *S.* 250.2 (SChr 116.314); *S.* 25D/360B.17, 18 (Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons* 258, 260). The analysis of this image below differs in several ways from van Neer's discussion in “Augustine on Laughter” 87–90. Most notably, van Neer uses this idea as evidence that

need to be healed by Christ the doctor. Some people, recognizing their state, have “clung to Christ, listened to him, honored him, followed him, been converted” by “his divine omnipotence.” Others “were already delirious in their wicked illness and didn’t know they were ill,” flattering their own health and despising the Lord’s cure.⁶⁶ The latter are the ones who, blinded and irrational with their own pride, mock Christians, and in so doing reveal that they have cast aside all hope of being healed themselves.⁶⁷ In their sickness, the wicked “laugh about pointless things to their own undoing”; they are “tossed this way and that by their lusts; when they are cheated they cry, when they cheat successfully they make merry.”⁶⁸ Since the wicked place all their stock in “false joys,” they will come to “real sorrows,” and because their laughter is devoid of truth, they are like the mad laughing in a fevered delirium.⁶⁹ “They laugh, and sane people cry,” because they know what future lies in store for the wicked.⁷⁰ After death, those who mock Christ the Body will recognize that they have cut themselves off from Christ the Head:

When both Head and members are scorned, it is the whole Christ who is scorned, because the righteous one consists of Head and body all together. Inevitably the whole Christ is scorned by the proud and godless. . . . Daily they rant against Christians, especially the lowly ones; they blaspheme daily; every day they bark their insults; and they are storing up torments for those very tongues of theirs which will thirst in hell, pining for a drop of water, but in vain. Not in this present age are their lips struck dumb. When will it happen? When their iniquities confront them to their faces, as the Book of Wisdom describes: *Then the just will stand with great constancy against those who have been tormenting them. Then the persecutors will say, “And these are the people we once held in derision, as a byword and a butt for our mockery!”*⁷¹

The wicked in their madness mock God’s people and so merit judgment, but God’s desire is not for their destruction. This life is like an olive press, Augustine says, in which God presses people in hopes of producing the pure oil of charity, but those who “sneer, mock, blaspheme,” and “make loud accusations in the streets” make themselves

Augustine condemns all laughter on earth and recommends only weeping for the just, until they attain the true laughter of heaven. On the first point, see “Laughter in Daily Life” above. On the response of the just to the laughter of the wicked, see “Laughter from Christ the Body” below.

66. S. 80.4 (PL 38.495), Hill, *WSA* III/3 353.

67. *En. Ps.* 67.42 (CCSL 39.900).

68. S. 31.4 and 6 (CCSL 41.395), Hill, *WSA* III/2 134–35.

69. S. 250.2 (SChr 116.314), Hill, *WSA* III/7 123.

70. S. 175.2.2 (PL 38.945), Hill, *WSA* III/5 266.

71. *En. Ps.* 30.2.3.5 (CCSL 38.216), Boulding, *WSA* III/15 351–52. This interpretation of Wis 5:3 also recurs in *En. Ps.* 6.12 (CCSL 38.34); *En. Ps.* 48.2.4 (CCSL 38.567); *En. Ps.* 57.20 (CCSL 39.726); *En. Ps.* 74.1 (CCSL 39.1024); *En. Ps.* 75.11 (CCSL 39.1045); *En. Ps.* 85.23 (CCSL 39.1195); *En. Ps.* 122.9 (CCSL 40.1821–22); 26D/198.43 (Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons* 399).

like the dregs that ooze out.⁷² God desires to bring even mockers and blasphemers to salvation, and so he sent Christ as a doctor to heal the sick children of Adam. Those who accept Christ's ministrations are joined to the Head as members of his Body and so are joined to his eternal life. Those who scorn him in his Body scorn him also as the Head and so reject eternal life in favor of everlasting death. And those who choose momentary laughter with everlasting tears must be mad indeed.

Laughter from Christ the Head

The laughter of unbelievers at Christ is not the only form of laughter with theological relevance for Christians; Christ in his Head and in his Body is also the agent of laughter, laughing at human beings. As before, I begin by discussing the laughter of Christ the Head at human beings, and then move to the laughter of Christ the Body at unbelievers.

Although Jesus never laughs in the texts of the canonical Gospels, Augustine has no problem saying that Christ the Head laughs at the wicked on the earth, echoing various Old Testament passages about God's laughter. Augustine approaches the question from several different angles in theologically important ways: in his sermons, he speaks of God's laughter at least five times,⁷³ of the divine laughter in the Scriptures at least seven times,⁷⁴ and of the laughter of Christ at least nine times.⁷⁵ At first glance, the notion that Christ laughs at the unjust and even the just may seem uncomfortably close to the docetic portrayal of the laughing Christ in the Nag Hammadi texts, or may seem simply unfitting for the redeemer of humankind.⁷⁶ For Augustine, however, the

72. S. 19.6 (CCSL 41.258), Hill, *WSA* III/1 385.

73. *En. Ps.* 9.1 (CCSL 38.58); *En. Ps.* 58.1.17 (CCSL 39.742); *En. Ps.* 58.2.9 (CCSL 39.752); *En. Ps.* 103.4.6, 7, 9, 10 (CCSL 40.1525–26, 1529–30); S. 20A.3 (CCSL 41.270).

74. *En. Ps.* 48.1.15 (CCSL 38.563); *En. Ps.* 82.4 (CCSL 39.1141); *En. Ps.* 89.9 (CCSL 39.1248); S. 53A.4 (MiAg 1.629); S. 68.4 (MiAg 1.358); S. 156.7.7 (PL 38.854); S. 361.6.6 (PL 39.1601).

75. *En. Ps.* 2.3 (CCSL 38.4); *En. Ps.* 36.2.2 (CCSL 38.348); *En. Ps.* 109.9 (CCSL 40.1609); *En. Ps.* 111.8 (CCSL 40.1629); S. 67.5.8 (PL 38.436); S. 116.7.7 (PL 38.660); S. 280.2.2 (PL 38.1281); S. 295.6.6 (PL 38.1351); S. 299C.1 (MiAg 1.522).

76. On the Gnostic/docetic texts and their use of laughter, see Gedaliahu A. G. Stroumsa, "Christ's Laughter: Docetic Origins Reconsidered," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 12 (2004) 267–88; and Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, "Why Did Jesus Laugh? Laughing in Biblical-Demiurgical Texts," in *Humour and Religion* 123–40. The key function of Christ's laughter in those texts is to signal the infinite separation between divine being and human seeming. Regarding the concern about fittingness, see Resnick, "Risus Monasticus" 91, where he points out that many monastic theologians found the idea of a laughing Christ inappropriate for a savior who redeemed humanity by dying on a cross. The problem of divine laughter remains to the present day: van Neer, "Augustine on Laughter" 84, argues that heavenly laughter has "nothing to do with superiority" and is only "a sign of relief and health" (90); contrarily, Screech argues that Christ's laughter in heaven is always a superior, mocking laugh at the wicked (*Laughter at the Foot of the Cross*) 43, 52; for

laughter of Christ the Head is an expression of the merciful workings of providence. Augustine's most common example of this provident laughter is also his clearest: the conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus.

As Augustine tells it, the story of Paul's conversion is particularly rich in dramatic tension and irony, with the fury of Saul standing between the innocence of Stephen and the provident will of God:

Let him take the letters, take them, set out, go on his way, breathe out slaughter, thirst for blood: *The one who dwells in the heavens will laugh him to scorn* (Ps 2:4). He was going, you see, as it is written, *breathing out slaughter*, and getting near to Damascus. Then the Lord intervened from heaven: *Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?* (Acts 9:1,4). I myself am here, I myself there; here the head, there the body. So don't let's be surprised, brothers and sisters; we belong to the body of Christ. *Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? It is hard for you to kick against the goad* (Acts 26:14). It's yourself you're hurting, because my Church grows with persecutions.⁷⁷

Augustine's startling addition to the familiar story is the idea that grace breaks into Saul's life through Christ's mocking him. Retelling the story in a different sermon, Augustine urges Christ to "mock [Saul's] rabid fury" with the grace of conversion, thereby depriving his murderous rage of its source, reducing all of his machinations to nothing in a single moment.⁷⁸ More importantly, however, Augustine's narrative of Paul's conversion joins it with Ps 2:4 and the chain of Old Testament passages that boast of God's mocking triumph over the wicked. In Augustine's understanding, Christ fulfills the prophecy of Ps 2:4 through his death, resurrection, and ascension. As the one who now reigns in heaven, he is the *one who dwells in the heavens*, and so he is also the one who *will laugh the sinner to scorn*, the one who "mocks *those who trust in their own virtue* (Ps 49:6),"⁷⁹ and the one who "mockingly addresses [a psalm] to the rich who set their hopes on riches."⁸⁰ All of God's mockery of Israel's infidelity, all his laughter at sinners, is drawn together in this moment.

Christ the Head's laughter from heaven provides Augustine with a visceral symbol for explaining the effects of providence in human life. The Lord's laughter is his consummate act of correction, either subjecting to punishment or inspiring to conversion:

Did the Lord not laugh as he foresaw the "day" of two bad men, the traitor Judas and the persecutor Saul? He had the day of one of them in view as the occasion for punishment, but

Kuschel, even God's laughter in the Psalms is "the divisive laughter of a partisan" that in Jesus must be transformed into "a laughter of boundless goodness and joy," rejecting all forms of mockery as demonic (*Laughter* 59, 93).

77. S. 295.6.6 (PL 38.1351), Hill, *WSA* III/8 201. This image recurs in *En. Ps.* 2.3 (CCSL 38.4); *En. Ps.* 36.2.2 (CCSL 38.348); S. 116.7.7 (PL 38.660); S. 295.6.6 (PL 38.1351); and S. 299C.1 (MiAg 1.522).

78. S. 116.7.7 (PL 38.660), Hill, *WSA* III/4 208.

79. S. 156.7.7 (PL 38.854), Hill, *WSA* III/5 102.

80. S. 53A.4 (MiAg 1.629), Hill, *WSA* III/3 80.

the day of the other as the time for justification. Retribution came to them both, sending one to the flames of hell, and knocking the other down with a voice from heaven. So you too, when you have to put up with a scoundrel, watch his day coming, watch it with God through the eyes of your faith; and when you find him or her savagely attacking you, say to yourself, "The offender will either be corrected and my companion, or incorrigible and with me no more."⁸¹

The purpose of Christ's laughter is not to prove his infinite superiority to Judas, Saul, or any of the other sinners in the world. Rather, by his laughter he subverts the self-destruction of sin, rooting out the pride and hate from which it derives and showing that the time of the wicked's triumph on the earth is limited by God's own designs. But the stark distinction between the way of the just and the way of the wicked is clearly on display: Christ's laughter denotes both foreknowledge of Judas's betrayal and rejection of Jesus and the salvation he offers, as well as Saul's conversion and acceptance of a genuinely new life through the gift of grace.

Divine laughter also calls attention to the discord between disordered human activity and the divine action, and provokes a change: Judas gives way to despair and so is lost; Saul responds to grace and so is saved. In God's providence, divine laughter heralds the joyous transformation of Paul's heart by grace; for others, divine laughter presages suffering. The wicked may be left to their wickedness: either they may awake from their spiritual slumber, or at the very least others might learn from their example (cf. 1 Cor 5:5).⁸² For Augustine, Christ's heavenly laughter is not a sign of divine cruelty or distance, but a sign of God's providence over Christ the Body. And while the wicked will feel the sting of this laughter as bitter mockery, therein may lie the goad of their salvation.

Laughter from Christ the Body

This consideration leads us to the final mode of laughter that Augustine discusses: the laughter by which Christ the Body participates in the heavenly laughter of Christ the Head, thereby cooperating with God's providence on earth. In at least 26 places in his sermons⁸³ Augustine argues that by laughing as a member of the Body of Christ, the

81. *En. Ps.* 36.2.2 (CCSL 38.348), Boulding, *WSA* III/16 105–6.

82. On the last point, see *S.* 67.5.8 (PL 38.436) and *S.* 280.2.2 (PL 38.1281).

83. *En. Ps.* 2.3 (CCSL 38.4); *En. Ps.* 7.14 (CCSL 38.45–46); *En. Ps.* 51.13–15 (CCSL 39.632–34); *En. Ps.* 90.1.10 (CCSL 39.1263); *En. Ps.* 93.2 (CCSL 39.1302); *En. Ps.* 103.4.6 (CCSL 40.1525); *En. Ps.* 122.9 (CCSL 40.1821–22); *En. Ps.* 134.23, 24 (CCSL 40.1954–55); *En. Ps.* 141.14 (CCSL 40.2055); *En. Ps.* 147.11 (CCSL 40.2147); *S.* 2.3 (CCSL 41.12); *S.* 6D/23B.2–9 (Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons* 460–4); *S.* 15.9 (CCSL 41.200); *S.* 46.41 (CCSL 41.570); *S.* 93.8.11–10.16 (PL 38.578–79); *S.* 13D/159A.3 (Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons* 91); *S.* 223A.4 (MiAg 1.14); *S.* 241.6 (PL 38.1136); *S.* 299D.1 (MiAg 1.75); *S.* 303.1 (PL 38.1394); *S.* 335G.1 (PLS 2.804); *S.* 22D/341.7 (Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons* 560); *S.* 348.2.3 (PL 39.1528); *S.* 24D/360A.10 (Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons* 240); *S.* 361.9.9 (PL 39.1603); *S.* 375B.7 (MiAg 1.28).

Christian can participate in God's plan of salvation.⁸⁴ Rather than commanding the faithful on earth to be morose until they get to heaven, Augustine goes so far as to say that *not* laughing at sin and idolatry can itself be a sin.⁸⁵ To see why, let us consider another dimension of the laughing mad-person image explored above to see the relation between tears and laughter for the Christian on this earth.

The literary and theological foil to the mad person who laughs at the doctor is the weeping of the person who desires the mad person to be healed. At first it seems that the only appropriate response to the frenzied laughter of the wicked is grief over the mad person's perdition, expressed through unflagging weeping:

For what reason does the just man cry? First of all, for all these. The just man, you see, cries truly over those who are crying fruitlessly. He cries about those who cry and he cries about those who laugh, because those who cry are crying pointlessly about pointless things, and those who laugh about pointless things are laughing to their own undoing. He cries all the time, so he cries the most.⁸⁶

But if the just man "cries all the time,"⁸⁷ how is the Christian commanded to laugh at pagan idols (cf. Jer 10:15)?⁸⁸ Why do the wise virgins taunt the foolish in Christ's parable, "not in hatred but in mockery"?⁸⁹ Why do the martyrs laugh at their persecutors?⁹⁰

The answer lies in the different ways Christians participate in the unfolding of divine providence in the world. For Augustine, the same sinful act should cause Christians both to laugh and to cry when viewed from different perspectives. Augustine states that the Christian "need have no qualms about laughing at those who should be wept over, and weeping over those who should be laughed at."⁹¹ Christian weeping arises from a compassionate concern for the good of the sinner; sane people weep over the mad person's laughter because they understand the other's deep need for healing and know that "repentance involves a salutary sorrow."⁹² But because only God knows who in the world is predestined for heaven, Christians weep even for the wicked on the earth so that God might hear their weeping, have mercy, and grant repentance and

84. See Burton, *Language in the Confessions* 168–70, where he provides similar passages from the *Confessions*.

85. *En. Ps.* 134.23, 24 (CCSL 40.1954–55); *S.* 2.3 (CCSL 41.12); *S.* 6D/23B.2 (Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons* 460); *S.* 24D/360A.10 (Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons* 240).

86. *S.* 31, 4 (CCSL 41.393–94), Hill, *WSA* III/2 134.

87. See Van Neer, "Augustine on Laughter" 90; Kuschel, *Laughter* 45.

88. See n. 85 above.

89. *En. Ps.* 147.11 (CCSL 40.2147), Boulding, *WSA* III/20 454; See *S.* 93.8.11 and 10.16 (PL 38.578–79).

90. *En. Ps.* 90.1.10 (CCSL 39.1263); *En. Ps.* 141.14 (CCSL 40.2055); *S.* 299D.1 (MiAg 1.75); *S.* 303.1 (PL 38.1394); *S.* 335G.1 (PLS 2.804). I discuss the case of the martyrs in more depth below.

91. *S.* 46.41 (CCSL 41.570), Hill, *WSA* III/2 293.

92. *S.* 175.2.2 (PL 38.945).

healing even to the most grievously ill (Ps 95:6–7).⁹³ On the other hand, grace sets Christians free to laugh at the wicked’s self-delusions.⁹⁴ This conviction is evident at times in Augustine’s method of preaching. He occasionally mocks sinners deluded by their rejection of Christ, in hopes that they will awake to their need for God’s grace.⁹⁵ Christians necessarily shift between laughter and weeping as they respond to the irrationality of the wicked under different aspects:

You see, when you have soared beyond all changeable things, spiritual as well as material, you will come to the contemplation of that Trinity, and you will drink from the same source as he drank from. When you come to that, you will laugh at all those who misrepresent this faith—and when you have begun by laughing, you will maybe weep later on, at the way in which with their futile contentions they fill their own eyes with smoke, to prevent them seeing it.⁹⁶

Both laughter and weeping are provisional on this earth; errors and sins can provoke both compassionate tears and corrective laughter. Here, then, is the solution to the problem created by the odd passage I cited above, in which Augustine insists that “as long as we are in this world, we should not laugh, lest we have occasion to weep later. . . . The time for laughter is saved up for the future.”⁹⁷ The prohibition of laughter must not be taken in an absolute sense. Rather, Christian laughter becomes sinful when the ones who laugh arrogantly presume that they are saved, and that the ones they mock are damned. In cautioning his listeners about this danger, Augustine says:

It sometimes happens that the very people at whom you sneer because they are worshiping stone deities will turn and worship God, and perhaps more fervently than you, who were just now making fun of them. It is our neighbors who lie hidden in these people who are not yet in the Church.⁹⁸

Because human beings have no absolute knowledge of the state of anyone’s soul, our laughter on this earth must be shaped by the desire for the conversion of the wicked, rather than by a superior sense of our own rectitude. The dynamic of laughing and weeping during our lives expresses the twofold desire for evil to be conquered and for the triumph of Christ to be effected. Only in heaven will this drama be completed, and

93. S. 47.1, 15 (CCSL 41.572, 585).

94. *En. Ps.* 7.14 (CCSL 38.45–46); *En. Ps.* 93.2 (CCSL 39.1302); *En. Ps.* 134.23, 24 (CCSL 40.1954–55); S. 93.8.11 and 9.14 (PL 38.578–79); S. 13D/159A.3 (Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons* 91); S. 348.2.3 (PL 39.1528).

95. S. 174.5.6 (PL 38.943). On the theme of derisive laughter used as a Christian polemical weapon in the patristic era, with a particular focus on Gregory Nazianzen, see Susanna Elm, “Laughter in Christian Polemics,” *Studia Patristica* 63 (2013) 195–202. My gratitude to Professor Elm for granting me access to her text before its publication.

96. S. 22D/341.7 (Dolbeau, *Vingt-six sermons* 560), Hill, *WSA* III/11 290.

97. *En. Ps.* 51.13 (CCSL 39.632–3), Boulding, *WSA* III/17 25–26.

98. *En. Ps.* 25.2.2 (CCSL 38.143), Boulding, *WSA* III/15 259.

so only in heaven can the laughter of Christians be free of weeping. Just as Christ has come and will come again, the time for laughter is now, and will come in the future.

The laughter of Christ the Body has its meaning only as a participation in the laughter of Christ the Head. Augustine reveals how Christians conform to Christ through increasing participation in his laughter. God made the devil to be mocked, not to gain victory over human beings:

Do you want to deride the dragon? Then be an angel of God. But you are not yet one of God's angels. In the meantime, provided that you are on the way to becoming one, there are angels who can deride the dragon and prevent him from hurting you. . . . He was made to be mocked. . . . The tempter wants to undermine the salvation promised to you, but he is not given permission. To make sure that he never is given permission, have Christ as your head. Kick away the dragon's head; do not consent to his suggestions; do not slip off your path. He is only the dragon God *made to play with*.⁹⁹

Christians are able to share in God's own mockery of Satan through increasing conformity to Christ, by which they are members of Christ's Body and so receive Christ as their Head, a process Augustine likens to becoming angelic. The more that Christians share in Christ, the more they are able to share in the victory of his laughter. Augustine develops the unity that laughter creates between Christ the Head and Christ the Body even more deeply, arguing that the very laughter of God is nothing other than the presence of God in the souls of his saints:

He who lives in heaven will laugh them to scorn, and the Lord will mock them. . . . None of this, however, is to be understood in a bodily sense, as though God laughed with his cheeks or expressed mockery with his nose; it must be referred to the capacity which he gives to his saints. They foresee what is to come, that the name of Christ and his lordship will spread to future generations and be acknowledged among the nations; and so they are enabled to understand that those others have devised futile schemes. This capacity, whereby such things are foreseen, is God's laughter and derision. *He who lives in heaven will laugh them to scorn:* if we understand heaven to be the souls of the saints, it is through them that God, who knows quite well in advance what is to happen, will deride and mock his enemies.¹⁰⁰

Speaking about God's laughter is more than a loose, anthropomorphic image; it is a symbol of the way human beings share in the providence of God by being made like Christ. And Christians reveal their conformity to Christ by sharing in his heavenly laughter, by which God spreads his lordship through the earth.

The laughter of the martyrs discloses this conformity. On five occasions Augustine describes the martyrs' spiritual combat in terms of laughter. He contends that because "they believed the promises of the Savior, they laughed at the threats of the persecutor."¹⁰¹ The martyrs, in whom perfect love has cast out fear (1 Jn 4:18), attain their

99. *En. Ps.* 103.4.9–10 (CCSL 40.1529–30), Boulding, *WSA* III/19 177–78.

100. *En. Ps.* 2.3 (CCSL 38.4), Boulding, *WSA* III/15 72–73.

101. *S.* 299D.1 (MiAg 1.75), Hill, *WSA* III/8 257. For the list see n. 90 above.

triumph by deriding those who kill them.¹⁰² The example of St. Laurence is particularly relevant here, as he first mocked his persecutor by presenting the poor of the city as the wealth of the church, then joked even from his martyr's fire, saying, "I'm all cooked; just turn me over and eat!"¹⁰³ In their laughter, the martyrs share in the merciful laughter of Christ in heaven; their blood serves as a means to convert the nations.¹⁰⁴ In this way, the martyrs' laughter gives an indisputable witness to God's mysterious and providential love for human beings, offering them union with God and allowing them to share in his laughter on earth and in heaven.

Conclusion

What, then, does the witness of Augustine's sermons tell us about the meaning of Christian laughter? Is all levity excessive, as James Martin's curmudgeonly formator would have it? Or is laughter "hope's last weapon"?¹⁰⁵ Augustine provides wide latitude for people to laugh, subject to the normal standards of morality by which every human act is regulated. Negatively speaking, we can say that throughout the thousands of pages of sermons that comprise his *Enarrationes in Psalmos* and *Sermones ad populum*, Augustine never once levels a general criticism of laughter—still less does he express revulsion for it or forbid its exercise during the trials of earthly life. The one blanket statement where he appears to delay all laughter until the eschaton reveals itself to be, on further investigation, not an analysis of the physical act of laughter, but a symbolic statement about the different ways human beings share in God's knowledge of salvation in time and in eternity.

Positively speaking, Augustine freely envisions his listeners peppering their lives with casual, conversational laughter; he warmly recommends laughter as a good instrument for shaming and correcting the wayward; and he repeatedly states that excesses in laughter are sins of only the lightest kind. Moreover, Augustine shows himself a master of the rhetorical dimensions of laughter, happy to cause his listeners to laugh and able to adapt his presentation when they laugh unexpectedly, yet also willing to correct them when they laugh inappropriately.¹⁰⁶ Laughter, Augustine realizes, is a capacity that

102. S. 335G.1 (PLS 2.804).

103. S. 303.1 (PL 38.1394). For an interesting analysis of the power of laughter in the martyrdom of St. Laurence, see Catherine Conybeare, "The Ambiguous Laughter of Saint Laurence," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10 (2002) 175–202.

104. See S. 280.2.2 (PL 38.1281).

105. Harvey Cox, *Feast of Fools* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1969) 20, quoted in Kuschel, *Laughter* 133.

106. Regardless of whether the *Rule of Augustine* is from Augustine's hand, it is striking how much the rule that bears his name reflects his theological anthropology, as it is one of the only early monastic rules that does not in any way dissuade those who follow it from laughing. On the prevalence of precepts against laughter in early medieval monastic rules, see Adkin, "Fathers on Laughter" 151; Gilhus, *Laughing Gods* 64–65; and Resnick, "Risus Monasticus" 93–94.

belongs to human beings from birth, and can be used well or for ill as it is subject to or escapes the direction of reason.

Augustine's consideration of laughter is profoundly liberating for those who worry that Christianity is a dour religion of mourning and weeping until the Second Coming. Still, the more significant dynamic revealed in his treatment of the question is the way laughter expedites the intimate connection between Christ the Head and Christ the Body. By attending to the four directions of laughter that Augustine envisions—*at* Christ the Head and Christ the Body or *from* Christ the Head and Christ the Body—we can see that laughter symbolizes the way that human beings share in the providence of God by being conformed to Christ.

The wicked mocked Christ on the cross, just as the sick mock those who try to heal them; this mad laughter is the archetype of all laughter that scorns the gospel. Christians will necessarily share in the mockery Christ underwent insofar as their lives are conformed to him through his Passion. When the wicked mock Christians for their faith, they confirm the deep unity between Christ the Body and Christ the Head, signaling that those who have been baptized into Christ already participate in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Likewise, the mockery of the wicked provides Christians opportunities to be drawn more profoundly into unity with Christ the Head by suffering the scorn he suffered.

When Christ is the one who laughs, laughter reveals God's provident involvement in the course of human history, the progress of the gospel, and the drama of every human life. Christ's heavenly laughter symbolizes the rebuke of divine justice, leading to the salvation or damnation of the one who bears it. In turn, Christ the Body shares in the laughter of Christ the Head by being made like God himself. Christians share in the manifold ways of providence in the world, laughing and weeping alternately through their life on earth, so that their prayers and actions under grace may work for the salvation of God's elect.

Laughter symbolizes nothing less than the way human beings are deified.¹⁰⁷ Christians grow in unity with Christ by suffering laughter and by laughing. Corrupt laughter at God is possible only when human beings have torn themselves away from unity with the God who made them; righteous laughter with God is the fruit of being made like God, having been formed into Christ by participation. Seen from the perspective of Augustine's theology of laughter, then, perhaps one of the most profound passages in Scripture is Ps 2:4: "He who sits in the heavens laughs; the LORD has them in derision" (Ps 2:4, RSV). By grace, laughter conforms us to God and opens us to the possibility of sharing in God's eternal laughter.

107. For a detailed treatment of the relation between Augustine's notion of the whole Christ and deification, see David Meconi, *The One Christ: St. Augustine's Theology of Deification* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2013).

Author biography

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