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ARTICLES

Ascension, Deification, and the Feast of the Ascension in St. Augustine

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This article explores Augustine of Hippo's doctrine of deification in his sermons given on the liturgical feast of the Ascension. Where Augustine scholarship tends to focus on his significant occasional writings such as the Donatist and Pelagian controversies, his true occasion, the pulpit is found lacking as a source for his theological discourse. It will be shown how Augustine uses the relatively novel liturgical celebration of the Feast of the Ascension to preach a doctrine of deification. This article surveys these Ascension day sermons by making use of various theological themes namely, recapitulation, the incarnational exchange of divine and human natures, divine adoption, and renewal of the heart.

Reading Augustine is one thing, but understanding his thoughts is another. Typically, the North African bishop is fragmented into varying Augustines: the young convert, the Platonist, the bishop, the polemicist, and so on. Yet, as author David Tracy describes, "Augustine is singular, both thinker and artist, rhetorician and dialectician, at times a greatly dialogical and fiercely polemical writer, a *contemplative and full-time pastor."*[1] Despite Augustine's complexity, his pastoral nature is seen clearly in recurring themes such as a commitment to practicing God's double love (Matt. 22:37–40), God's gift of love poured out into a Christian (Rom. 5:5), the mystical body (Acts 9:4), and finally, deification (Ps. 82:1), a theme in Augustine's soteriology that is often disregarded, misunderstood, or altogether ignored. It is the purpose of this article to demonstrate that Augustine's understanding of deification is a substantive component of his soteriology, as observed in his preaching, namely on the feast of the Ascension.

Untangling Augustine: Platonic Ascent or Christian Deification?

Before examining Augustine's Ascension sermons, we must first demonstrate deification as a significant theme within Augustine's thought. First and foremost, the language of deification is rather foreign to the language of the Latin West. Outside of Augustine, only sixteen uses of *deificare* can

1 David Tracy, *Filaments: Theological Profiles: Selected Essays,* 1st ed. Vol. 2 (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 68. Emphasis added.

be found.[2] This presents a need for a shift in methodology. A thematic approach is needed rather than a lexical examination. To do so, however, this article reads Augustine in concert with the so-called "New Canon," the company seeking to read Augustine *ad fontes*.[3] In order to come to a proper understanding of Augustine's deification we must examine the scholarship that has hitherto obscured the point. The following discusses the accusations that Augustine's idea of deification is merely Neoplatonic, and then engages a burgeoning branch of Augustinian scholarship that seeks to engage the theologian on his own terms.[4]

A working definition for deification will prove useful at the outset. As will be discussed, deification, for Augustine, emphasizes a new reality of incorporation into the incarnate Son of God, his body, the church, and transformation of the eyes of the heart. His deification is not the kind of apotheosis of Greco-Roman polity, a crossing of human mutable nature into divine immutable essence. Nor does Augustine think humanity becomes like God *en se*, which is how he understands the enticement of the serpent in Genesis 3.[5] Rather, this participation is an ascent of Christian faith that affects human ontology by *becoming* a child of God through the incarnate Christ's sonship, and participating in his body, the church. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit mediates this reality, the love of God who is poured into the heart, transforming the Christian from the inside out. For Augustine, any soteriological potency is found precisely in humanity's being in and through the Son of God, who took on a human nature so that humanity might take on divinity in accordance with the human capacity for it.

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2 David Vincent Meconi, *The One Christ: St. Augustine's Theology of Deification* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press. 2013): 126.

3 See: Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2014); Michel R Barnes, "Augustine in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology," *Theological Studies* 56, no. 2 (June 1995): 237–50; Michael Cameron, "Christ Meets Me Everywhere: Augustine's Early Figurative Exegesis. " *Oxford Studies in Historical Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Meconi, *The One Christ*; Adam Ployd, *Augustine, the Trinity, and the church: A Reading of the Anti-Donatist Sermons*, 1st ed. (London; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

4 Joseph Lenow, "Parting with Augustine: Historical Study and Contemporary Augustinianisms," *Anglican Theological Review* 96, no. 3 (January 1, 2014): 569–86. Lenow is helpful on this identifying the streams of Augustinian scholarship. The methodology of this article and the many sources cited seek to engage Augustine on his own terms, outlines by Lenow as such "(1) increased attention to the sermons and letters of Augustine as sources for reconstructing his doctrinal teachings; (2) recognition of Augustine's Trinitarian writings as largely polemical works directed especially against Latin Homoians; (3) foregrounding Augustine's exegesis over-against his appropriation of Neoplatonic philosophy as the determining feature of his Trinitarian thought; (4) viewing Christology as the epistemic presupposition of knowledge of the Triune God; and (5) situating Augustine within a fourth-century theological culture shared with the Greek fathers committed to the doctrines of divine simplicity, inseparable operations, and the monarchy of the Father, and accordingly rejecting an opposition between "Eastern" and "Western" approaches to Trinitarian theology." 571.

5 Meconi, *The One Christ*, 66–67.

When searching for Augustine's understanding of deification a particular tradition is discovered. This reading typically begins and ends with his early years post-conversion. The question to consider is not whether Augustine was influenced by Plotinus or Porphyry, but to what degree. Does Augustine consider the Son predominantly as the Nicene incarnate Word, unbegotten from the Father, or as divine *nous*? Peter Brown remarks broadly, "Augustine, however, was a man steeped in Neoplatonic ways of thought. The whole world appeared to him as a world of 'becoming,' as a hierarchy of imperfectly realized forms, which depended for their quality on 'participating' in an Intelligible World of Ideal Forms."[6] The influence of Platonism on Augustine's thought is certainly clear.[7] Brown extends Augustine's penchant for Platonism from his Christology into his ecclesiology, "[Neoplatonism] was the same with Augustine's view of the church." What is more, Laela Zwolo emphasizes the degree to which Augustine's attitude toward Platonism never waned, claiming "that the 'Plotinian flavor' is as strong as it ever was [toward the end of his life]: Augustine remains a Platonist through and through."[8] Clearly, understanding Augustine as a thoroughgoing Platonist is a dominant reading. Eugene TeSelle, offering a moderate approach, remarks on Augustine's dependence on Plotinus and Porphyry as late as 410, writing "what [Augustine] accepted from Platonism and what he rejected was always determined by the rule of faith."[9] It is my position that TeSelle has the fairest evaluation of Augustine's thought, considering both Augustine's deeply Platonic past and its enduring, though waning, influence throughout his life in the church.

As if evaluating Augustine's thought philosophically were not difficult enough, choosing a starting point proves likewise challenging. Augustine's understanding of soteriology is as complex as his person, taking on different emphases throughout his life. Augustine has been typically understood to popularize the ransom theory of atonement, the child of Anselm's later-developed satisfaction theory. Or Augustine will be retrieved through the Augustinian father of Protestantism, Martin Luther.[10] The challenges are

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6 Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*. forty-fifth anniversary ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 217.

7 Saint Augustine and William Babcock, *The City of God*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, Study Edition (New York: New City Press, 2013); Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by. Sarah Ruden, (New York: Modern Library, 2018). See: C*onf.* 7.13–14 and *The City of God,* XXII. 17–18.

8 Laela Zwollo, *St. Augustine and Plotinus: The Human Mind as Image of the Divine* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 27.

9 Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian*, (London: Burns & Oates, 1970), 38 and 266.

10 Present debates surround Luther's emphasis on the atonement with the dawn of Tuomo Mannerma's Finnish School of interpretation, whose aim is to suggest Luther meant to emphasize deification as the precondition to justification but was misunderstood by early Lutherans in putting together the Formula of the Concord. See: Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Union with Christ: The New Finnish Interpretation of Luther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Tuomo Mannermaa and Kirsi I. Stjerna, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

plentiful. However, even if Augustine understood salvation in some fashion resembling deification, it certainly pales in comparison to the emphasis he places on the juridical language found in his anti-Pelagian writings. Alistair McGrath is helpful on this point, and is worth quoting at length:

> An element which underlies [his] understanding of the nature of justifying righteousness is the Greek concept of deification, which makes its appearance in the later Augustinian soteriology ... By this participation in the life of the Trinity, the justified sinner may be said to be deified. Augustine's understanding of adoptive filiation is such that the believer not merely receives the status of sonhood but becomes a child of God.[11]

Even as McGrath indicates the presence of deification in Augustine's understanding of justification, he nevertheless labels it under its Platonic heritage. Language of deification can be contentious, with Eastern traditions preferring particular language which the West views with suspicion.[12] As a result, the categories of *deificare* and *iustitia dei* are viewed competitively rather than synergistically.[13] McGrath is instructive, observing in Augustine parallel lines of what may be commonly understood as sharp dividing doctrines between Western justifying righteousness and an Eastern deifying righteousness. We see that the two trajectories of thought do not have to be mutually exclusive, and in the case of Augustine, have a not insignificant overlap.

Nevertheless, when it comes to Augustine himself, we discern a particular vocabulary surrounding his doctrine of deification, namely, a participation in the divine life of God through the incarnate Son's humanity. Our search for this language begins with Patricia Wilson-Kastner, who provides a review of the concept of grace in the thought of Augustine in comparison to the Cappadocian Fathers and contemporaneously, John Meyendorff.[14] Wilson-Kastner identifies commonalities between East and West with regard to the answers each tradition provides to the question of "what is grace?" and "how does one receive it?" In other words, how does Augustine, as representative

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11 Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 4th ed.. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 48.

12 Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Russell has a more optimistic evaluation of Augustine's view of deification in comparison to the likes of Vladimir Lossky. Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood: St Vladimir's Seminary, 1974), 71–110.

13 McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*., 209. McGrath remarks on the retrieval of Augustine through a Reformed lens as "the most accurate description of the doctrines of justification associated with the Reformed and Lutheran churches from 1530 onwards is that they represent a radically new interpretation of the Pauline concept of "imputed righteousness" set within an Augustinian soteriological framework."

14 Patricia Wilson-Kastner, "Grace as Participation in the Divine Life in the Theology of Augustine of Hippo," *Augustinian Studies* 7 (1976), 134–52.

of the West and compared to the East, resolve the conundrum of divine transcendence, fallen human nature, and free will? By beginning with the language of grace, Wilson-Kastner releases tension from the contentious language of deification in the first place, which allows a common language to be used. Wilson-Kastner observes a common theme in Augustine present in the East pertaining to a commitment to the incarnate Word as the relational soteriological key. Christ, in taking on human nature, enlivens humanity by the power of the Holy Spirit, who mediates Christ's very presence. Furthermore, the church is the particular location where all other divine factors enable a Christian to be deified or participate in the life of God.[15] What ultimately distinguishes between the Latin West in Augustine and East on deification, according to Wilson-Kastner, is the will. For Augustine, God is the first cause of faith to which a Christian responds, a position which is expressed strongly in his anti-Pelagian works.[16] However, the issue remains: where is Augustine's doctrine of deification to be discovered?

In Gerald Bonner's article, "Augustine's Conception of Deification," he breaks from the methodological box of reading Augustine's atonement through the Pelagian controversy by reading his works in its various forms, discerning a doctrine of deification.[17] Bonner observes in Augustine's deification a particular ecclesial emphasis. The *totus Christus* is where Christ's body, the members of the historical church, are unified with him through his own human nature, in the form of a servant. In creating his church body Christ exists as its head, uniting himself as bridegroom to a bride. This new body that the incarnate Son puts on demonstrates unity in multiplicity where the resurrected and ascended Christ brings together the one lump of new humanity into himself. This association is so strong for Augustine that, though there are many members to his body, Christ can be identified as the singular grammatical subject on its behalf. Augustine frequently cites Acts 9:4 to communicate this concept, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me.*"[18] This participation of body with head is deliberate as it is the head which gives life to the body but the body which gives representation of Christ the head throughout the whole world.[19] Human nature rises in Christ to the presence of God, not individually, but as a whole is representative within the life of the church. Bonner draws attention to this in *The City of God (Book X):* "Therefore, because that flesh has received resurrection and eternal life, which

15 Wilson-Kastner, "Grace," 149–52.

16 Wilson-Kastner, "Grace," 149–51.

17 Gerald Bonner, "Augustine's Conception of Deification," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 37, no. 2 (1986): 369–86.

18 Augustine, "Sermons (230–272B) on the Liturgical Seasons," The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century; 3, v. 7 (New York: New City Press, 1993). All references to Augustine's Ascension sermons come from this edition. *s.* 263A.

19 See: *s.* 262.5 and *s.* 265E.5.

arose and being made alive ascended into heaven, this has been promised to us also ... The whole Christ will receive the inheritance — the whole according to the manhood, that is, head and body."[20] As a result of Christ's bodily ascension, the possibility of human deification is made available. For Augustine, one human is present in the ascended Christ, a deified humanity with him.

Bonner further develops the human will as the place of departure between Eastern understandings of theosis and Augustine's deification. For Augustine, human nature is damaged in the fall and cannot respond to God's acts of grace independently. Humanity requires the assistance of Christ as a divine mediator through the Holy Spirit, who is present in the Christian. "Deification can come only from a participation in God made possible by divine initiative," Bonner writes, "Christ, then, is the theological datum; the philosophical conception is that of participation by man in God."[21] Humanity is deified in its capacity for divinity according to finite human nature within the context of the church, in an "ecclesial process."[22] Therefore, Augustine's deification does not come about by human work but generates from the humility of the incarnate Son taking on human nature.[23] Through Christ's sharing of humanity's infirmity of fallen image, he lifts up that same tattered image to participation in his divinity.

Advancing Bonner's work, David Meconi brings significant clarity to Augustine's doctrine of deification, observing in Augustine a foundational trinitarian structure of being and contingency of creation which lays the ground for humanity's capacity for divinity.[24] Stanley Rosenberg further demonstrates how Augustine's deification flows out of his doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and humanity as *imago dei*.[25] For Augustine, creation from nothing establishes an irreconcilable ontological distance between creator and creature. God is infinite, immutable, and beyond physical senses.[26] Humanity is mutable, changeable by nature. How can this gulf be crossed? The incarnation solves this dilemma for Augustine. Participation becomes possible because divinity descends to humanity.

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20 Bonner, "Augustine's Conception," 375.

21 Bonner, "Augustine's Conception," 372–73.

22 Bonner, "Augustine's Conception," 383.

23 Bonner, "Augustine's Conception," 374. Quoting Augustine's *En. in Ps. 58* "The teacher of humility and sharer of our infirmity, giving us participation of His divinity, coming down that He might both teach and be the way, has deigned most highly to commend his humility to us."

24 Meconi, *The One Christ,* 1–78.

25 Stanley P Rosenberg, "Not so Alien and Unnatural After All: The Role of Privation and Deification in Augustine's Sermons," *Journal of Religion & Society.* 15 Suppl. Series (2018), 170–96.

26 *De Trinitate* 1.3.

Augustine's Paradigms for Deification

Our next section surveys Meconi's four paradigms for understanding Augustine's doctrine of deification. Meconi helpfully surveys the eighteen uses of *deificare* in Augustine in chronological order. By doing so, a textured Augustine emerges. Augustine's early days are more Platonic in nature, but as he matures, Pro-Nicene commitments chasten his theological reflections. In other words, Augustine uses the language of the rule of faith to articulate his theology rather than the language of Porphyry or Plato. I take Adam Ployd's understanding of the term, "Pro-Nicene," which he defines as "a complex of principles and exegetical concerns that govern the grammar and logic of trinitarian (as well as Christological and pneumatological) discourse."[27] Meconi's four paradigms for Augustine's doctrine of deification are: recapitulation, exchange of divine and human nature, divine adoption, and renewal of the heart.[28]

Discussing the paradigms of recapitulation and exchange, Meconi understands Augustine to describe the *telos* of humanity as communion with God, initiated by the exchange of Christ's divine nature for human nature.[29] This exchange of divine for human nature creates the possibility for mutable participation in the divine. Key to Augustine's understanding of *deificare* is "the assembly of gods" of Psalm 82:1. These "gods" are human beings, ontologically distinct from God himself. "We carry mortality about with us, we endure infirmity, we look forward to divinity." Augustine writes, "For God wishes not only to vivify, but also to deify us."[30] Humanity hopes for its recapitulative divinization, the consummate reality of participation in God's goodness without privation.[31] Christ's humility is the catalyst where his descent into human nature permits the exchange of his divinity for humanity and consequently begins to divinize it, reenergizing human nature toward its participatory *telos*. Through the vivifying, deifying power of Christ, humanity participates in the divine life through the human nature of Christ. In the same sermon, Augustine takes on the voice of Christ, saying "I took to myself your mortal reality. We mustn't find it incredible, brothers and sisters, that human beings became gods, that is, that those who were human beings became gods."[32] This recapitulatory deifying grace brings fallen human nature to its intended end, to become gods.

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27 Ployd, *Augustine, the Trinity, and the Church,* 7.

28 Meconi, *The One Christ,* 88.

29 Augustine's deifying recapitulation is distinct from Irenaeus in lacking cosmological contours.

30 Meconi, *The One Christ,* 91, citing *Hill, Sermons (III/11), s. 23B*.1; 37.

31 Meconi, *The One Christ,* 89–92.

32 *s*. 23B.1

Concerning Augustine's deifying adoption, it is here where his doctrine of justification and deification work alongside one another. Meconi draws attention to a sermon, where Augustine bridges what may typically be understood as contrary doctrines: justification and deification.[33] He writes, "He who justifies is the same who deifies because by justifying he made [humanity] into children of God: he gave them power to become children of God."[34] Augustine is comfortable with holding this tension with both hands. Since God is the enabling power of both soteriological realities, blurring the lines between creator and creature is circumvented. The divine enacts a change of ontology, of deification for the human who becomes a child through Christ. Augustine continues in his remarks, "If we are made God's children ... this is the grace of the one who adopts and not through the nature of the one who begets."[35] Only the Son of God is son by nature, in accordance with his eternal begottenness. Humans participate as adopted children by truly *becoming* children of God, justified and deified.

Lastly, Meconi identifies a moral domain of Augustine's doctrine of deification. Being deified entails a moralizing transformation which allows humanity to see, with the eyes of faith, Christ in both the form of a man and in the form of a servant, that is, with divinized eyes. "And there he stood, in front of the eyes of a servant, in the form of a servant, saving the form of God for deified eyes ... You want to see the Father, see me."[36] Humanity gains the capacity to behold God through his deifying grace. This is only made possible in the incarnate Christ who resurrects human nature in himself, mediating his own being. In other words, Meconi shows Augustine's concern to identify and redirect humanity's relationship to God in Christ as humanity's postlapsarian state naturally pursues signs (*signum*) instead of the true things (*res)* of God. True sight leads to true love of God and neighbor.

Sermones Ad Populum: Festal Sermons on the Day of Ascension[37]

Augustine's sermons on the Feast of Ascension have received a modest amount of scholarly attention, spanning the last century.[38] Of the thirteen extant sermons on the occasion, most are evaluated for their Christological,

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33 Meconi, *The One Christ,* 108–10, Boulding, Expositions (IIII/16), *En Ps. 49.2*; 381.

34 Meconi, *The One Christ,* 108.

35 Meconi, *The One Christ,* 109.

36 Meconi, *The One Christ,* 120–23, Hill, Sermons (III/4), *s.* 126.14; 278.

37 The challenges of dating Augustine's sermons are numerous. Identifying a specific year or any other specific date is rife with more ambiguity than clarity. Hill offers provisional dates for the sermons, but certainty is spurious at best.

38 See: J. G. Davies, "He Ascended Into Heaven A Study In The History Of Doctrine," (London: Lutterworth Press, 1958); Anthony Dupont, "Augustine's Sermones Ad Populum on the Feast of the Ascension: A Liturgical-Soteriological Understanding of Grace," *Questions Liturgiques* 92, no. 4 (2011): 340–60; William H. Marrevee, "The Ascension of Christ in the Works of St. Augustine," [Publications Sériées de l'Université d'Ottawa] (*Saint Paul University*; University of Ottawa Press, 1967); Hendrik F. Stander, "Fourth- and Fifth-Century Homilists on the Ascension of Christ," in *The Early Church in Its Context* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 268–86.

ecclesiological, or moral emphases.[39] Hendrick Stander helpfully observes that the church was never a point of controversy and is largely constructive in his survey.[40] By contrast, J.G. Davies negatively evaluates Augustine (along with all other Western homilists) as being too concerned with physicality.[41] Davies insists on understanding the Ascension not as a physical transposition of Christ's carnality, but an incarnational process "whereby the manhood, i.e., the human organism, of the Son of God was transformed while still retaining its identity."[42] Stander similarly identifies a cosmological hierarchy in fourth- and fifth-century preachers. Certainly, Augustine's cosmology has its hierarchical structure, but this pertains more to the order of being rather than physically localized spaces.[43] When viewed hierarchically, a misreading of Augustine's doctrine of deification may occur, likening it more toward Platonic ascent than Christian deification.

As we will see, Augustine utilizes the biblical content of the church, namely, the physical assumption of Jesus into a cloud as the basis for moral encouragement in deifying participation, exhorting his congregation consistently to "lift your heart up to the Lord."[44]

Augustinian scholarship has largely inclined toward Augustine's dogmatic and controversial writings and therefore has necessarily diminished the value of his sermons for theological discourse. If seeking a normative Augustine, where his thought can be discerned over a large period of time, why not, Rosenberg suggests, go to the source of writings that are by definition most normative? Enter the sermon. I am convinced by the value of reading Augustine in his true occasional setting: the pulpit. Therefore, Augustine was largely in a position to be constructive as he preached for the occasion.

Augustine's sermons on the occasion of the Feast of the Ascension[45] are chosen here to situate Augustine as a truly "occasional theologian."[46] It is in the new liturgical celebration of the church where the incarnate Son

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39 Dupont, "Augustine's Sermones, " 359.

40 Stander, "Fourth- and Fifth-Century Homilists," 286.

41 Davies, "He Ascended Into Heaven," 145. Davies' positive remarks regarding an Origenist cosmology are telling, however, remarking "such an understanding of the nature of the resurrection body inevitably affected the formulation of the doctrine of the Ascension, and hence the many references to the 'body,' to the 'flesh' or to the 'covering' which Christ took with him into heaven."

42 Davies, "He Ascended Into Heaven," 146.

43 *s.* 265E.3 demonstrates this in passing "You went ahead to heaven' you have taken your seat at the Father's right hand; all confess and praise you, angels, men, heavens, earth, the underworld."

44 *s.* 261.1.

45 Augustine, "Sermons (230–272B) on the Liturgical Seasons"

46 Wilson-Kastner, "Grace as Participation," 143. Wilson-Kastner, many decades ahead of Rosenberg's observations notes a similar methodological approach toward Augustine. Central to Wilson-Kastner's article is leaving the "occasional" Augustine of the anti-Pelagian writings for his sermons to discover his understanding of grace in relation to deification.

ascends in his humanity to the throne room of God. This movement of Christ's humanity into glorification, his physical ascent into heaven should therefore be profitable as one considers Augustine's doctrine of deification and participation. In the Ascension of Christ, Christ becomes the first fruits of human nature and its newfound capacity to participate in the divine life.[47]

At this point we will observe, in several Ascension feast-day sermons, where Augustine features his language of deification through the lens of Bonner and Meconi's contributions. We examine sermons which demonstrate Meconi's four paradigms of Augustine's vocabulary for deification, recapitulation, adoption, exchange, and ethical formation, alongside Bonner's attention to the ecclesial dimension as represented by the totus Christus. With the exception of two explicit occasions, we take Meconi's indication of the thematic use of Augustine's vocabulary of deification, to demonstrate that Augustine understands Christ's Ascension to be the theological event where humanity is adopted as children of God, rises with him by his own humanity, incorporated into the totus Christus, and is enabled to respond in moral formation by drawing the eyes of the heart toward God.

Sermon 265

In sermon 265 we discover themes of ecclesial participation and recapitulating grace which deify humanity eschatologically. Augustine begins sermon 265 in much the same way as he begins others, explaining the reason for Jesus' forty-day delay post-resurrection as a means of encouragement for the apostles. Augustine colors the picture of the apostles staring into heaven after their witness of the resurrected Lord's departure in the Acts account. At the outset Augustine cannot help himself from mentioning the head/body language of the *totus Christus,* "So they were, astonished at seeing him ascend, and yet rejoicing at his going up above; the *head* going first, you see, gives hope to the members ..."[48] He continues to expound the specific language of the passage. The two angelic men inquire of the apostles their reason for staring above and exhort them to wait for Christ's return as he went up. On this point Augustine says, "That's how he will come. He will come to men, he will come, a man; but it is God who will come as a man. He will come as true man and God, in order to *make men into gods* (*ut faciat homines deos*)."[49]

Augustine startlingly mentions this deifying act in passing without mention of either Psalm 82 or Psalm 97 to qualify his meaning, as he does in 265E. This quick remark, unrestricted by an interpretation of corresponding Psalms, echoes Athanasius: "For he was incarnate that we might be made

47 *s.* 263A, 264.

48 *s.* 265.2, emphasis added.

49 *s.* 265.2, emphasis added.

god."[50] Notably, Augustine places deification as something that is completed at the second coming of Christ as he "comes in the same way." Christ goes up with his physically resurrected body, retaining the scars of his earthly foray, taking human nature with him so that he can bring men into a share of divinity. Augustine continues to describe the effects of the events of Holy Week and beyond. "Let us be astonished at the death of Christ, but as for his resurrection let us rather praise it than be astonished at it. Our sin was our ruin; our price, the blood of Christ; our hope the resurrection of Christ; its realization; the coming of Christ."[51] Language of price and blood, typically used for language of a (modern) understanding of atonement, appears alongside the hope of deification, the hope of God's power to "make men gods." After entertaining the narrative in a rhetorical flourish of question and answer regarding the timing of Christ's return, Augustine unsurprisingly moves to a moral dimension of his sermon. Christ's Ascension marks the beginning of the unity of the church who is created by his sending of the Holy Spirit for global witness. The Holy Spirit is given twice, once to the apostles by Christ's breath and again at Pentecost to model the double love of God (Matt. 22:37–40) as evidence of God's love poured into the life of the believer, who is part of the church (Rom. 5:5). The point remains that despite Augustine's succinctness, the deification of mankind is mentioned alongside other pivotal language used to describe the salvation of humanity, standing as a feature in his sermon to call his audience on toward loving God and neighbor.

Sermon 263A

Our next two sermons observe the thematic language of adoption and ecclesial participation as the places where deifying grace pours out into the church.[52] A typical passage Augustine uses to preach on the Ascension is Colossians 3:1–2, emphasizing "seek the things that are above, not those that are on earth." Divine presence and absence are questions which Augustine intuitively addresses when preaching on this occasion. The bishop's answer is always to appeal to Christ in the form of God and in the form of servant.[53] This sermon sets a contrast between physical toil and heavenly participation. Access to Christ's presence is asserted near the beginning, "He, while he is there [heaven], is also with us; and we, while we are here, are also with him. That's true of him in both his divinity and his power and his love; while as for us, even if we cannot make it true with divinity, we can make it true with

50 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, Popular Patristics Series; No. 44b (Yonkers: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 107.

51 *s.* 265.1

52 See also: *s.* 262, 5, 264, 5; *s.* 254, 12; *s.* 265E, 1-5, *s*. 265F, 5 where Augustine ascribes to Christ's Ascension a theological link to the *totus Christus.*

53 *s.* 265E.2.

love, provided it is love for him."[54] Augustine reads Matthew 28:20 and John 3:13 in connection with each other. The latter establishes Christ's movement of incarnational descent and ascent grounding humanity's new capacity for participation in him, while the former passage affirms his presence through faith, hope, and charity.

The *totus Christus* is a key feature which bridges Christ's presence and absence. Through participation in Christ as head of the church, his presence is guaranteed. John 3:13 no longer speaks of Christ alone, as a singular person, but Christ as head who has incorporated into himself his own new body, the church. "So, it does indeed mean nobody but himself, because we too *are himself,* insofar as he is the Son of man because of us, and we are *sons of God* because of him."[55] Ployd helps us see how Augustine understands Christ in scripture: "Augustine shows how the Christian is incorporated into Christ's own grammatical subject. The union of Christians in Christ is an extension of Christ's own self-predication that joins us to each other by joining us to Christ's "I", that there is no longer *unus homo,* who ascends to God"[56] William Marrevee speaks of this presence in another way, as a "diffusion" of Christ's presence within his church: "Without denying the proper value of each mystery of Christ in relation to the church, the intimate bond between Christ's church and the *diffusion* of the church in Augustine's understanding is striking."[57]

Unity of Christian and Christ is constituted by his self-giving and adoption as a change in ontology. However, as discussed above with Meconi, adoption as "sons of God" is not a breach of divine and human distinction. Furthermore, this unity cannot be considered in any way related to the individual or individualism. Whenever Augustine speaks of the body of Christ he necessarily is speaking of the collective unity of his church. According to Cameron, Augustine can predicate multiple actions to the same persons in Christ, to himself, to himself on behalf of weak humanity, and himself in the church.[58] In this way, Augustine can say truly that "nobody ascended except the one who descended" while yet parsing who participates in this ascent and descent according to their status as either begotten, in reference to the Incarnate and Ascended Christ, or created, in reference to deified humanity. In other words, Christ can only descend since he alone has come down from heaven. At the same time, Christ receives another grammatical predication of name in his humanity: head. A head cannot exist without his

54 *s.* 263A.1.

55 *s.* 263A.2, emphasis added.

56 Ployd, *Augustine, the Trinity, and the Church*, 57–58.

57 Marrevee, "The Ascension of Christ," 120, emphasis added.

58 Cameron, "Christ Meets Me Everywhere," 260.

body. Augustine is keen on this point and makes it explicit: "... although he came down without a body, ascended with a body, and we too are going to ascend, not by our own prowess, by our and his oneness. *Two, indeed, in one flesh; it is a great sacrament in Christ and in the church."*[59]

For Augustine, his Christology and ecclesiology have an inseparable interplay. Only Christ is Son of God according to nature while the church is *made* a child of God by grace. The quality and value of the mystical body of Christ and its head retain their respective ontological integrity while nonetheless truly integrated. Of course, these modes of Christian participation in the descended and ascended Christ are accessible only in the church. To participate in God is to be included into the singular subject of Christ as he ascends to heaven, becoming a child of God by adoption and becoming assumed into his body. These changes for Christians occur at an ontological level as they become one with Christ. In this way Augustine communicates the ideas which accompany deification without necessarily requiring use of the word.

Sermon 265E

Next, we examine sermon 265E, a fragmentary yet rich exhortation. Here the reader enters into the middle of a diatribe with Augustine taking on the voice of Christ, scrupulously articulating the accomplishments of redemption. Payment is made, payment for ransom on the tree, payment for blood, payment for resurrection, payment for the Holy Spirit and so on. Augustine reads Psalm 97:9, "You are the Lord, most high above all the earth; you are exceedingly exalted above all gods," doing so in order to enter into a discussion of Christ's humility in the form of a servant. In pro-Nicene language Christ can only be said to have been exalted in his humanity since he is equal to the Father by nature. As he finishes with doxological flourish, he connects Psalm 82:1 to ascertain the identity of the "gods" Christ is exalted above. As observed earlier, Augustine's use of Psalm 82:1 is typical in his understanding of recapitulatory, deifying grace.

In this sermon, deification as adoption may be discerned as Augustine's discussion on the demigods in Psalm 82, as it were. As expected, Augustine is Christocentric and concerned with the distinction of his divinity and human nature. There is a clear soteriological order. Only Christ can save because of his shared nature with the Father. Exaltation of the preincarnate Son is categorically absurd since he is co-equal with the Father. However, as a result of his humility, demonstrated in the form of a servant, Christ can be exalted. "But they [humanity] are adopted sons. There is one by nature,

59 *s.* 263A.3, emphasis added.

others by grace; one Son by nature, the rest by grace."[60] Christ's willing descent establishes both the ontological trajectory of humanity's participation in him as adopted children and a model of love. "We were all born according to the human condition, he was born out of divine compassion."

The ecclesial dimension is pressed again. Those gods over which Christ is exalted are both his bride and glory throughout the earth (Ps. 57:5, 11). For Augustine, the church is manifestly a picture of Christ's reign, pruned and attended to through "heresies and schisms in various places."[61] Since Christ is exalted above the gods, where is his glory is manifest, what is his glory? Augustine answers. As *woman is the glory of the man* (1 Cor. 11:7), so too in the church is Christ's bride and glory. Again, we observe the *totus Christus* at work. "With ordinary human weddings, the bride is one person, the invited guests are others. We, as well as being invited, are also ourselves the bride. We are, after all, the church." This example admittedly is less clear but presents Augustine's ability to conceive of a multiplicity of persons existing as a single subject by their common participation. Key to Augustine's point made is the derivative nature of a woman's glory to man in 1 Corinthians 11:7. Christ's glory is to the bride/church as man's glory is to woman. Marrevee explains, "The close association which Augustine makes between Christ's church and the diffusion of the church leads us to conclude that he considers the presence of the church among the nations to be the outward and tangible manifestation of the *glorification* which Christ received in the church."[62] Augustine sees in 1 Corinthians 11 a contingent yet analogous relationship between the woman receiving man's glory and man being "the image and glory of God."[63] The church receives her deifying glory from Christ her head. Where the church cannot cross the line of divine nature, she participates through her head and there receives deifying glory.

Sermon 261 and 264

Lastly, we examine sermon 261 and 264 to demonstrate the deifying ascent of the heart and eyes as means of reaching Christ's divinity. This sermon begins with a pastoral instruction to what is the new development in church celebration of the Feast of Ascension.[64] The beginning of the sermon features Augustine's call to his audience to ascend to the Lord through faith. Therefore, "lift up our hearts to the Lord." Augustine then moves to defend the divinity of the Son with Nicene precision, establishing the eternal Word

60 *s.* 265E.3.

61 *s.* 265E.4.

62 Marrevee, "The Ascension of Christ," 121, emphasis added.

63 *s.* 265E.5, this language and passage are also present in *s.* 262.5.

64 Jill Burnett Comings, "Aspects of the Liturgical Year in Cappadocia (325–430)," *Patristic Studies,* v. 7 (New York: Peter Lang, 2005) 41–44. The earliest sermon on the ascension is ascribed to Gregory of Nyssa in 377.

from the beginning to whom the human heart ascends. Physical sight is insufficient for the task, rather a posture of the heart is required to orient a person's spirit to ascend. The desperate call to follow Christ upward comes after appealing to Paul's ascent to the third heaven in 2 Corinthians 12. Christ, where he is, "is something the mind can be pointed at." "Follow on," Augustine exhorts, "let us both seek together now by believing."[65] Augustine encourages his audience to arrive at the goal of Christ's ascent, by understanding that ascent is a journey to his divinity through the mind and heart. Augustine characterizes the body as an impure vessel striving to seek what is pure, the divinity of God. This requires a purifying exercise in the heart beginning with how one thinks. Error comes when trying to think of God as light, within physical categories contained in the heart.[66] The call for purification is a participation in acts of charity, forgiveness, and confession — fundamentally, participation in the actions of the incarnate Word.[67] The center of spiritual mass, as it were, is Christ in the beginning and at the end of faith. The path up to God is one of contemplation and purification, it is no wonder why "it is difficult to contemplate and have full knowledge of God's substance," precisely because "it is necessary for our minds to be purified before that inexpressible reality can be inexpressibly seen by them."[68]

To articulate the Word dwelling among man, Augustine keeps sight of the Word at a distance because of sin. "By Christ as man you wend your way to Christ as God. God is too much for you; but God became man." The incarnate Word establishes the *via* to the *patria* of humanity.[69] Because of humanities concupiscence, it is unable to behold God without help. "It's one and the same Christ, both the *way* to go by and the *place* to go to."[70] In a fallen, sinful state, humanity cannot attend to God with unaided sight, so it must access the divine through Christ's humanity and humility. By participating in acts of charity, seeking after him in love, and purifying the mind of pride, the heart is lifted up. So, the believer is called to "attend to their heart," to behold Christ with humility, to venture up and into God, receiving purification and seeing with the deified eyes of the heart. Whereas some evaluate Augustine's sermons on the Ascension relegating this movement of the heart to a mere moral category, we can see that this

65 *s.* 261, 3.

66 *De Trin.* 1.3.

67 *s.* 261, 5–6.

68 *De Trin.* 1.3.

69 *De Doctrina* 1.7–9, 21–25.

70 *s.* 261, 7.

evaluation falls short. Meconi states, "God's ontological descent parallels humanity's moral humility and in such moral humility is found humanity's ontological exaltation."[71]

Sermon 264 continues the deifying vision of the heart. Christ's humility is humility *par excellence* to which Christians, lifting the eyes of the heart up to Christ, perceive and are transformed by his divinity through his humanity. By "having the mind of Christ" (Phil. 2:5–6), sight beyond the functions of physical eyes is possible. This distinction is vital for Augustine precisely because if physical sight is sufficient to say that Christ is visible or seen, then the Jews saw Christ in his incarnation.[72] Since this obviously cannot be the case, Augustine turns to John 14:9, "Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father." This becomes a key verse for Augustine which establishes the hiddenness of Christ's divinity which must be grasped by faith. Augustine continues with careful language to clarify which passages, such as John 14:28, "the Father is greater than I," predicate Christ in his human nature and Christ in his equality with the Father, like John 10:30, "I and my Father are one." Understanding the divine and human nature for Augustine is crucial to understanding, beholding, and therefore participating in the life of God. How can someone imitate someone that they cannot see? Taking on the voice of the Ascended Christ, Augustine says:

> I am removing myself from you outwardly and filling *you with myself inwardly*. It's in his divinity that he possesses the heart (in the flesh he speaks to the heart through the eyes, and instructs it from outside); *dwelling within*, so that we may be converted inwardly and be *brought to life from him*, and *formed from him*, because he is the unformed form of everything there is.[73]

In another Ascension sermon, Augustine returns to this theme, remarking upon the relationship of faith and possessing Christ in the heart, receiving the benefits of his victory over Satan: "It's not a particularly great thing to see Christ with the eyes in the head, but it's a great thing to believe about Christ with the eyes of the heart." And a little further on he continues, "Believe in him, and you see him; he isn't in front of your eyes, and he is in possession of your heart."[74] In either case, for Christ to renew the hearts of men comes with his own presence, reanimating the human nature. The eyes of the heart need cleansing, training in perceiving who Christ is from the starting point of his flesh. It appears that Augustine is using this language not simply for moral

71 Meconi, *The One Christ,* 101.

72 *s.* 264.2, emphasis added.

73 *s.* 264.4, emphasis added.

74 *s.* 263.3.

exhortation but to establish the need for human nature to be deified. The ascended Christ is the solution to the conundrum of the deficient capacity of physical *and* spiritual sight by his indwelling. Humanity's new life is "formed from him" so that it can once again "wend [its] way to the Lord."[75]

Conclusion

This article has sought to enhance the extant scholarship concerning Augustine's doctrine of deification by working through his thought in his most normative place, the pulpit. By engaging with Augustine with an ear to listen closely, blocking out the noise of other controversial writings, as modern scholarship has typically focused, profit lies close at hand. In this case, we saw that Augustine indeed understands the deification of the believer both in explicit and thematic language. Deification is clearly a substantive doctrine for Augustine's soteriology. Humanity is indeed in dire straits. It bears the guilt of sin and faces ontological ruin. The eyes of human hearts are afflicted by sin-ridden astigmatism, always pursuing a privation of the good. However, for Augustine, the nature of humanity is renewed to receive, behold, and become Christ within his own body, the church. Christians embody the glory of Christ on earth, incorporated into his own person in such a way that it can be said "[Paul] can no longer look into the eyes of a Christian without meeting there the gaze of Christ."[76] Christ who dwells in the Christian affects their whole being, deifying them within and without, within through adoption, without by incorporation into the church, within through spiritual renewal, without by spiritual practice and moral virtue. Each paradigm establishes an interlocking set of actions, initiated by God in the direction of fallen humanity. Augustine's soteriology is complex enough to include the idea of deification.

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75 *s.* 264.5.

76 Emile Mersch, *The Theology of the Mystical Body*, translated by C. Vollert (St. Louis: Herder, 1951), 104.

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