

Christ's self-identification with "the least of mine"

(Matthew 25:40,45)

according to Augustine of Hippo:

Is this the humility of God?

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Abstract: One of the foremost Augustinian scholars today provides insight into Augustine's understanding of Christ's self-identification with "the least of mine" in Matthew 25, an understanding that has universal as distinct from specific Christian designation. He further demonstrates how Matthew 25 can be used as a hermeneutical key for interpreting Augustine more broadly. The final question focuses on the divine self-emptying of Christ in the Incarnation and its link to Augustine's emphasis on the unity between Christ and the poor. [Editor]

In the 2002 volume of the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* which includes Matthew's Last Judgment (25:31-46) there are two excerpts from commentaries of Origen, six from Chrysostom, one from Jerome, six from the anonymous *Incomplete Work on Matthew*, and three from Epiphanius the Latin (late 5th – early 6th century).¹ There are no citations from Augustine. Yet, in the works of Augustine one or other or several of the verses from the Last Judgment pericope, Matthew 25:31-46, occur clearly on at least 275 occasions, and in at least 90 of these cases the focus is explicitly or implicitly on either v. 40 or v. 45 with their reference to "the least of mine". By contrast, the great Eastern interpreter of the Last Judgment

¹ See M. Simonetti, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture. New Testament 1b: Matthew 14-28*. Thomas C. Oden, gen. ed. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2002, pp. 229-235.

pericope, St John Chrysostom, employs one or other or several verses from Mt 25:35-40,42-45 on 92 occasions, while using vv. 40 and 45 explicitly only twenty-one times.²

In the first section of this article , I will rehearse some considerations regarding the frequency with which Mt 25:35-40, 42-45 occurs in Augustine; I will note the other major Scriptural references that accompany Augustine’s commentary on these verses; and I will briefly comment on the principal form in which verse 40 is quoted (this being a form, it has to be said, that differs in at least one significant respect from the Vulgate and from modern translations). In the second section, I will draw attention to three instances in Augustine’s works where he presents Mt 25:35-40 as a kind of hermeneutical key. Then, in the third and final section, the question will be addressed whether Augustine’s presentation of Christ’s self-identification with the needy might be informed by his understanding of the humility of God in the Incarnation, particularly given that there is a similarity of vocabulary between the two contexts: Christ allows himself (*dignatus est*) to be served in each of his little ones (Mt 25:40); and, in the Incarnation, God allows Godself to assume humility (*humilitatem ... suspicere dignatus fuerit*) for the sake of the salvation of those who believe in him.

1. Matthew 25:40,45 in Augustine: frequency, orchestration and form

Firstly, then, a word is to be said about the frequency of Augustine’s usage of Matthew 25, its Scriptural orchestration, and the principal form in which verse 40 is

² See R. Brändle, *Matth. 25,31-46 im Werk des Johannes Chrysostomos: Ein Beitrag zur Auslegungsgeschichte und zur Erforschung der Ethik der Griechischen Kirche um die Wende vom 4. zum 5 Jahrhundert* (Beiträge zur Geschichte der biblischen Exegese). Tübingen, 1979, at p. 37.

quoted.³ Of the more than 90 explicit and implicit references to verses 40 and 45, no fewer than 76 are met in homilies, and the majority of these are to be found in the *Expositions of the Psalms*. Augustine's explicit use of verses 40 and 45 is most concentrated in his preaching both at Hippo and at Carthage during the years 410-413, at a time when refugees were flooding into Africa after the fall of Rome.⁴

As far as Scriptural orchestration is concerned, the most popular accompaniment of these verses from Matthew is undoubtedly provided by Acts 9:4: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" In Augustine this verse from Acts occurs at least twenty-one times in the same contexts as Matthew 25:40,45. This connection between Acts 9:4 and Matthew 25 had originally been made by Origen – and Origen too had also been the first to associate the idea of the body of Christ with Matthew 25.⁵ Yet, Origen's interpretation of clothing the naked, for example, and welcoming the stranger, is decidedly allegorical and spiritual. As he says:

Therefore, when we have clothed with garments of this [spiritual] type "one of the least" who believe in Christ, [by imparting knowledge to them and clothing them with virtue], we have apparently clothed the Lord himself, so that the word of God in the world will not go naked. But we must also welcome the Son of God who became a stranger and the members of his body who are strangers in the world, untainted by all mundane actions, even as he says about himself and his disciples: "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (Jn 17:14).⁶

³ On the following see R. Canning, *The Unity of Love for God and Neighbour in St. Augustine*. Heverlee-Leuven: Augustinian Historical Institute, 1993, pp. 342-351.

⁴ See P. V. Chiappa, *Il tema della povertà nella predicazione di Sant'Agostino*, Milan, 1975, p. 181 and note 17.

⁵ See Brändle, p. 348, n. 27.

⁶ *Sermon 72* (GCS 38, p. 169,13-17). Eng. trans. from Simonetti, p. 233.

Contrast this with the concreteness that is an integral feature of many of Augustine's commentaries on these and related verses. At judgment time, Augustine says, the rich person hears the accusing words, "I was hungry and you did not give me to eat" (Mt 25:45)

[because] in his great arrogance he despised the empty bellies of so many poor people. He did not know that the bellies of the poor are safer than his own barns. For what he had stocked up in those barns of his could be stolen by thieves. If, however, he had stored his goods in the bellies of the poor, even though they would indeed return to the earth, they would be kept more safely in heaven.⁷

If in Augustine it is Acts 9:4 that appears most frequently in accompaniment to Matthew 25:40,45, this verse does not, according to John Burnaby, provide the key to the correct interpretation of these Matthaean verses in Augustine. For Burnaby, "Augustine read this great chapter in St. Matthew with the text of Luke in his mind."⁸ The text to which Burnaby is referring is Lk 6:37c-38a, i.e., "Forgive and it shall be forgiven you; give and it shall be given to you" which, in his view, Augustine read in the sense imparted to it by Cyprian, i.e.: "give and it shall be forgiven you." "It is amazing," says Burnaby, "that [Augustine] could fail to see how grossly he was distorting the simplicity of Christ's words ..." On this account, Burnaby maintains, there is no possible defence for Augustine because he derives the merit of almsgiving from "God's own presence *in pauperibus suis*",¹⁰ understanding God's being present in the poor not for the sake of the poor themselves but rather in the interests of their benefactors, enabling the latter to gain heavenly bonuses.

⁷ *Sermo* 36,9,9 (CC 41,441), my translation. Cf. Basil, *Hom. XXI, Quod reb. mund.*, 7; II, 168, D.-E: the bellies of the poor are the safest ships for the soul.

⁸ J. Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study in the Religion of St. Augustine*. London, 1960, 3rd edition, p. 133-134.

⁹ Burnaby, pp. 133-134.

¹⁰ Burnaby, p. 134.

With reference to Burnaby's harsh judgment on Augustine regarding this point, let it suffice for now to comment, firstly, that the key text posited by Burnaby, i.e., Lk 6:37c-38a, occurs only six times in the same contexts as Matthew 25:40,45 in Augustine and secondly, that, even if one counts all the instances in which the theme of almsgiving casting out sin appears in its various guises, this would account for only one third of those Augustinian passages in which the interpretation of Matthew 25:40,45 is at issue. Much more importantly, however, the context in Augustine for any discussion of almsgiving casting out sin and related themes is almost invariably Christ's active self-identification with the needy as the whole Christ (*totus Christus*), head and members.¹¹ The bond of love uniting head and members is so strong that the members, even down to the lowly feet, may be called Christ himself: *nos ipse*¹² or *idem ipse*.¹³ This Christ advocates actively on behalf of the poor; he is *poscens*, *exhortans* and *imperans*, asking insistently and making demands.¹⁴

As a final dimension of this first point, on the frequency, orchestration, and form of Matthew 25:40,45 in Augustine, a comment is to be made on the text of verse 40 most frequently used by him.¹⁵ Both in the *Speculum* and in *De Civitate Dei*,¹⁶ where the

¹¹ See Canning, pp. 359-368.

¹² *Sermo* 133,8 (PL 38,755): "Nam etsi nos ipse non essemus non esset verum, Cum uni ex minimis meis fecistis, mihi fecistis...Ergo et nos ipse, quia nos membra eius, quia nos corpus eius, quia ipse caput nostrum, quia totus Christus caput et corpus." See also *Sermo* 137,2,2 (PL 38,755): "Quia per connexionem caritatis unitas est a capite usque ad pedes."

¹³ See, for example, *En. in ps.* 67,25 (CC 39,888): :Christus quipped ascendit in altum, et sedet ad dexteram patris; sed nisi et hic esset in terries, non inde clamasset: *Saule, Saule, quid me persequeris?* Cum igitur idem ipse dicat, *Quando uni ex minimis meis fecistis, mihi fecistis;* quid dubitamus eum accipere in membris suis, quae dona membra eius accipiunt?"

¹⁴ See *Sermo* 206,2 (PL 38,1042).

¹⁵ See Canning, pp. 346-351.

¹⁶ *Speculum* 25 (CSEL 12,172-173). *De Civitate Dei* XX,5 (CC 48,705-706).

pericope is quoted in its entirety, we find at verse 40: *Amen, dico vobis, quamdiu fecistis uni de his fratribus meis minimis, mihi fecistis.* With a change of preposition from *de* to *ex* this is also exactly the same as the Vulgate version. Surprisingly, however, this form of Mt 25:40 cannot be found anywhere else in the entire Augustinian corpus. The predominant form used by Augustine is in fact: *Cum* [or *Quando*] (*enim*) *uni ex minimis meis fecistis, mihi fecistis.* What this in effect means is that, nowhere apart from the full texts quoted in *De Civitate Dei* XX and the *Speculum* does the phrase *de his fratribus meis* occur.

It is not that the Latin version including *fratribus meis* was unknown in Africa. It is found twice in Cyprian of Carthage in the middle of the third century and also in Tychonius, the Donatist, where it is accompanied by the gloss *in me credentibus*, i.e., “one of the least of these brothers of mine who believe in me.” Ambrose consistently omits the *fratribus meis*, as does Ambrosiaster. Outside of Africa, Hilary of Poitiers witnesses to the verse both with and without the *fratribus meis*, and the phrase reappears in Leo the Great. We are faced with the question, then, how to assess Augustine’s omission. One line of inquiry might be to look at Augustine’s general use of the term *frater*. According to Hélène Pétré, Augustine reserves the name *frater* / “brother” for Christians.¹⁷ Now it is true that, in about ten cases, despite the fact that the expression *de his fratribus meis* is absent from Augustine’s text of the verse itself, the word *frater* still appears in the context of these Augustinian explanations of Mt 25:40, and it is present in such a way as to qualify “the least of mine” as members of Christ’s body. Nevertheless, in a number of places, there is internal evidence which suggests that neither the members of Christ’s body nor indeed the *fratres* themselves

¹⁷ H. Pétré, *Caritas: Etude sur le vocabulaire latin de la charité*. Louvain, 1948, pp. 134-136.

are simply to be identified solely with people who are designated as explicitly Christian. In combination with the almost invariable absence of the phrase *fratribus meis* from Augustine's version of verse 40, this openness of the text allows the possibility of interpreting "the least of mine" in a universal sense. A strong case can thus be made for a universal interpretation in at least thirty-seven of the ninety or so Augustinian texts in question.¹⁸ The needy person that one meets along the way might be a fellow Christian; on the other hand, he or she might simply be a beggar in rags (*pannosus quisque mendicus*).¹⁹

2. Matthew 25:40 as a hermeneutical key for Augustine

In a sermon (389) which Edmund Hill dates to 410-411, Augustine points to "something astonishing" (*mira res*) in the criteria that Christ will use when he comes in judgment. Christ, Augustine reminds his audience, will not consign a person to eternal fire because he or she is "an adulterer, a murderer, a cheat ... [or] guilty of sacrilege, blasphemy or infidelity." People will not be invited to receive the kingdom prepared for them because they "have lived chaste lives...have not practised deceit or oppressed the poor...have not trespassed on the rights of others or misled them by taking a false oath."

It is not this that Christ says, but "receive the kingdom, because I was hungry and you gave me to eat." How greatly this outweighs all the rest. For on every other matter the Lord is silent. He mentions this alone.²⁰

¹⁸ See Canning, pp. 387-394.

¹⁹ *Sermo Frangipane* 9,4.

²⁰ *Sermo 389,5 (Révue Bénédictine 58 (1948) p. 50):* "Non dixit haec, sed: *Percipite regnum. Quare? Esurivi enim et dedistis mihi manducare. Quanto hoc excellit, quando cetera tacuit et hoc solum dominus nominavit.*"

Similarly in relation to those who are consigned to eternal fire, nothing is mentioned about adultery, murder and so forth. “The only reason given [for this condemnatory judgment] is: “I was hungry and you did not give me to eat.”” Having rehearsed these startling criteria of final judgment, Augustine notices that his audience is truly “moved by the text [of Matthew 25] and amazed,” and he points out that their being moved and amazed is with good reason, for ‘[this] is indeed something astonishing [*mira res*].”²¹ Earlier in the same sermon (389), in commenting on Mt 25:40, he had said:

“When you did it for one of the least of mine, you did it for me.” Christ receives what you give. He who gave you the wherewithal to be generous receives your gifts. He who at the end of time will give himself to you receives what you now give to the beggar. For, brothers and sisters, from time to time I have spoken to you about *the scripture passage which makes the deepest impression on me*, and I will continue to remind you of it.²²

Augustine here acknowledges that the Scripture text that ‘makes the deepest impression on [him]’²³ is Mt 25:31-46, and he remarks that “something astonishing” is going on here. Note well that the astonishing thing is not so much that the works of mercy are effective for cancelling the debt of sin as that judgment will be made according as to how people have simply loved.²⁴ The *mira res* consists in this: that Christ is in need here on earth; that the needy Christ asks men and women to help

²¹ *Sermo 389,5 (Révue Bénédictine 58 (1948) p. 50): “Video etiam vos moveri et mirari. Et vere mira res...”*

²² *Sermo 389,4 (Révue Bénédictine 58 (1948) p. 49): “Cum uni ex minimis meis fecistis, mihi fecistis.* Christ accept quod dedisti; ille accept, qui tibi unde dares dedit; ille accepti, qui in fine tibi seipsum dabit. Nam et hoc, fraters, aliquando commonui caritatem vestram, quod me fateor in scriptura Dei plurimum movit, et saepius debo commonere.” Emphasis in translation added.

²³ E. Hill in WSA translates *plurimum movet* as “has exercised me no little.” In view of the generally superlative sense given to *plurimum*, Hill’s translation appears somewhat understated. Augustine means more in relation to the influence that Matthew 25 has had on him than Hill’s translation would suggest.

²⁴ The above substantially follows Canning, p. 368.

him; that, if they fail to do so, no matter how exemplary their lives otherwise are, they will be judged as barren and will not be counted among the blessed; and that the criterion for judgment will be different from what people thought (judgment is *non inde unde putatis*), not good morals but concern for the needs of Christ's least ones, that is, for Christ himself. Eternal life is to be found in nourishing, clothing, hospitably receiving, and visiting the Christ who is so rich in goodness and the capacity to set people free that he allows himself (*dignatus est*) to be served in each of his little ones.²⁵ Note the use of the very *dignari* to which we will return below in presenting Augustine's treatment of the humility of God.

To continue our emphasis on the centrality of Mt 25:40 to the patterns of Augustine's preaching, further evidence is to be found in a sermon which, according to Othmar Perler, was preached at Hippo in the winter of 411-412, at a time when the strangers to be made welcome might very well have been refugees from Italy who were fleeing the advance of Alaric's army.²⁶ In this sermon Augustine envisages his congregation thinking how blessed was Zacchaeus from Luke's Gospel (19:1-10) in being able to receive Christ into his home, even to the extent of Augustine's congregation's sighing with joy as if they themselves were wanting to offer hospitality to Christ along with Zacchaeus. "Couldn't something like that ever happen to us?" he imagines them asking, but immediately answers: "But no, because Christ has already ascended into heaven." Augustine then turns the discussion in a new direction by putting a question directly to Christ and having his congregation repeat Christ's answer:

²⁵ *Quaestiones Evangeliorum* 2,38 (PL 35, 1351): "... qui seipsum pasci, vestiri, hospitio recipi, visitari in unoquoque minorum suorum, liberatoris bonitate dignatus est."

²⁶ O. Perler, *Les voyages de saint Augustin*, Etudes Augustiniennes, Paris, 1969, p. 404. See also p. 15 and p. 74.

I ask you to tell me then, Christ, what your New Testament says. Allow me to be blessed because of your law. Sisters and brothers, repeat it aloud, so that you might realise that you are not deprived of Christ's presence. Listen to what the judge will say: "When you did it to one of the least of mine you did it to me." Each of you expects to receive Christ seated in heaven. Turn your attention to him ... in need and a stranger... As your knowledge of Christian teaching grows, so may your good works increase.²⁷

In *Sermon* 389 from a year or two earlier, we have seen that Augustine identifies Matthew 25 as the Scripture text that "makes the deepest impression on [him]." So now here too in *Sermon* 25 Mt 25:40, in particular, plays the key role. It is invoked to stand as it were for the New Testament as a whole, and indeed for all of the law and Christian teaching. "When you did it to one of the least of mine you did it to me": this is the New Testament law in summary.

The third instance in Augustine's work in which he presents Mt 25:35-40 as a kind of hermeneutical key is *Exposition of Psalm* 140,7. Here, the theme of the *totus Christus* is uppermost. The context, however, is not that of the poor Christ seeking aid; the concern here is directly with the rules for interpreting Scripture. Augustine is interested specifically in showing how the psalm verse "that my heart may not turn to evil words" (Ps. 140,4), which cannot be understood on the lips of Christ without embarrassment, may be referred to the church. This transposition of speaker from Christ to the church is made possible by applying the rule (*regula*) that is provided by Mt 25:35-40 accompanied by Acts 9:4.²⁸ In other similar texts it is a matter of applying this same rule constituted by Matthew 25:35-40 and Acts 9:4 in order to show how a particular psalm verse such as "let those who seek my life be confused

²⁷ *Sermo* 25,8,8 (CC 41,339):

²⁸ *En. in ps.* 140,7 (CC 40,2030): "Verba illa attendite ubi nobis regula figitur."

and abashed” (Ps 70:3) may be understood on the lips of both Christ and the church.²⁹

The same principle is at work. In the words of Mt 25:35-40 and Acts 9:4, Augustine states, “the main rules are established in accordance with which the rest of Scripture is to be understood.”³⁰ These rules are clearly reminiscent of, and may well be aligned with, cognate statements from *De Doctrina Christiana* where we read for example: “So if it seems to you that you have understood the divine scriptures, or any part of them, in such a way that by this understanding you do not build up this twin love of God and neighbour, then you have not yet understood them.”³¹ The hermeneutical key formed by Matthew 25:35-40 and Acts 9:4 is also evocative of the classic statement from *De catechizandis rudibus* 4,8 to the effect that all of divine scripture “tells of Christ and calls to love” – *Christum narrat et dilectionem monet.*

3. How the theme of God’s humility in the incarnation is linked to Christ’s favour in identifying himself with the needy?

In this third section we emphasise that the statement of Christ’s self-identification with the poor à la Matthew 25:40,45 is theologically grounded in the compassionate love of Christ, the head, for his members: “Just think how much he loved you.”³² The unity between Christ and the poor is founded in God’s self-emptying in the poverty of Christ that is revealed in the Incarnation. *Sermon 239* (which Künzelman dates to “before 400”, Poque to 410-412, and Hill to “before 417”), is eloquent in this regard. Augustine has God speak to greedy money-lenders as follows:

²⁹ *En in ps. 69,3* (CC 39,932).

³⁰ *En. in ps. 140,7* (CC 40,2030): “haec christianis inusitata esse non debent, maxime in quibus regulae fixae sunt et ceterorum intellegendorum; et aut non turbantur, aut cito corrigentur.”

³¹ *De Doctrina Christiana I,30,40.*

³² *Sermo 239,5,6* (PL38,1129): “Cogita quemadmodum te dilexit.”

“Be grasping, be as grasping as you can; but you must issue a summons against me to satisfy your grasping greed.” God says to you, “Issue a summons against me [rather than making new difficulties for a struggling poor person who owes you money]; I made my rich Son poor for your sake.” It was *because of us*, you see, [Augustine continues], that *Christ became poor, though he was rich* (2 Cor. 8:9) ... Just think how much he loved you. *All things were made through him, and without him nothing was made* (Jn 1:3) ... He who made everything has been made in the midst of everything ... He, though being rich, took flesh in the virgin’s womb ... Such his wealth, such his poverty; wealth, to get you created; poverty, to get you restored. So when in your case you welcome a poor person as a poor person, the emphasis is on the favour [*dignatio*] that has been done to you to make such hospitality possible, and not now on the actual miserable state of the person in need³³ ...

When you did it to one of the least of mine, you did it to me (Mt 25:40). That rich person is in dire need until the end of the world. Without the slightest doubt he’s in dire need, not in the head, but in his members. Where is he in need? In those in whom he suffered pain, when he said, *Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?* (Acts 9:4) So let us take care of Christ. He’s with us in those who are his own, he’s with us in ourselves; nor was it to no purpose that he said, *Behold, I am with you until the consummation of the world* (Mt 28:20).³⁴

The theme of Christ’s favour [*dignatio*] to human beings is emphasised here, a theme that is already present in Irenaeus³⁵ and that appears on seventeen occasions in the Matthew 25 texts from Augustine that we have under consideration. Often on these occasions, as is the case here, the rich Christ’s showing favour [*dignatio*] through becoming poor is presented as being directed towards those who have money or goods to lend, and this favour [*dignatio*] is held out to them as an exhortation to “take care of Christ.” In this way Augustine deploys the theme of Christ’s favour to practical effect in his homilies, reinforcing as it does his call to the wealthy members

³³ *Sermo* 239,5,6 (PL38,1129): “Quod ille ergo pauper susceptus est hospitio quasi pauper, dignatio fuit suspicentis, non miseria egentis.” For the rest, with a few small amendments, we have followed Hill’s translation in WSA, but the translation of this sentence is our own.

³⁴ *Sermo* 239,5,6-6,7 (PL 38,1129-1130). Trans. E. Hill, WSA, adapted. The connection of Mt 25:40 with the needy and, in the same context, with the humanity of Christ, is already present in Ambrose. See M Puzicha, *Christus peregrinus: Die Fremdenaufnahme (Mt 25,35) als Werk der privaten Wohltätigkeit im Urteil der Alten Kirche*. Münster, 1980, p. 124-125.

³⁵ *Adversus Haereses* 4,18,6 (SC 100,209). See M Puzicha, *Christus peregrinus*, p. 106.

of his audience to be generous to the needy.³⁶ And this he can do because he understands that it is God's sovereign will [*voluit*] to identify Godself with all who are struggling.³⁷

In passage after passage where he is dealing with the Incarnation, Augustine dwells on the *humility* of Christ – even the humility of God – that is manifested in God's becoming a human being. *Homo erat, humilis factus erat.*³⁸ And at least seven times in these same contexts Augustine uses the verb *dignari* / “to favour” to describe the action that God takes in *making himself humble* in the Incarnation.³⁹ As we have just seen, however, the same verb *dignari* and its cognate noun *dignatio* also serve to emphasise God's favour in being in want in each and every one of the least of his.⁴⁰ And, furthermore, the incarnational background here is sometimes quite explicit.

For this reason it is quite surprising to find that, alongside the theme of God's poverty in the Incarnation, the actual theme of humility, both in God's becoming a human

³⁶ For example, see *Sermo* 389,4 (*Révue Bénédictine* 58 (1948) p. 51): :”Cum ergo sit Dominus et verus Dominus, et bonorum nostrorum non egeat; tamen ut aliquid etiam erga illum faceremus, esurire *dignatus est* in pauperibus suis.” Emphasis added. See Canning, pp. 416-417.

³⁷ *Sermo Mai* 13,4 (MA I,291): “In minimis suis laborantibus in terra quodammodo personam suam misericorditer esse *voluit*, subveniens de caelo omnibus qui laborant.” See also *Sermo* 206,2 (PL 38,1042): “In paupere enim se passi *voluit*, qui non esurit”; *En. in ps.* 147,13 (CC 40,2148): “...deo, qui est super omnia benedictus in saecula, deus egere a te *voluit* ... Erogari sibi vult deus ex illo quod dedit.” Emphasis added.

³⁸ *Io. eu. tr.* 40,9. On the general theme of the humility of God in Augustine, see Raymond Canning, “Mark God's humility. The humility of God and the humility of the teacher: Augustine's *De catechizandis rudibus*”, in *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church*, Vol. IV, *The Spiritual Life*, W. Mayer, P. Allen & L. Cross, eds, Brisbane: Centre for Early Christian Studies, 2006, pp. 311-25, at pp. 311-313, 321-322, and bibliography. See now also Notker Baumann, *Die Demut als Grundlage aller Tugenden bei Augustinus* (Patrologia - Beiträge zum Studium der Kirchenväter 21). Frankfurt a.M. u.a.: Peter Lang, 2009.

³⁹ See, for example, Ep. 140,3: “...quantus ille deus sit, qui hanc *humilitatem* pro salute fidelium suscipere *dignatus fuerit...*”. Emphasis added.

⁴⁰ See *Sermo* 38,6,8 (CC 41,484): [Christus] pascit et esurit propter te ... in unoquoque paupere temporaliter *dignatus est accipere.*” Emphasis added.

being and in Christ's passion, does not bulk visibly larger in Augustine's commentary on Matthew 25 as a whole. When Augustine uses the expression "the least of mine," i.e., those members of his in whom Christ wished to be in need, we might have expected that he would be prompted to refer explicitly also to the very humility of God in Christ which is central to his understanding of the Incarnation. Yet, only in *Sermon 137*,⁴¹ from 400-405, and *Sermon 123*,⁴² which is of uncertain date, is there a clear coincidence of themes with explicit references to humility.⁴³

Strangely, the clearest case of connection between "the least of mine" and the humility of the incarnate and suffering Christ contains no explicit reference to Mt 25:40 at all. Rather, the text that is quoted is actually Mt 10:42a, i.e., "whoever gives one of the least of mine [*uni ex minimis meis*] a cup of cold water simply in the name of a disciple, amen I say to you, he shall not lose his reward." This comes towards the end of an exposition that Augustine is giving on Sirach 22:23, "Hold faith with a neighbour in his poverty so that you may enjoy his good times," and it leads Augustine in short order to refer to 2 Cor. 8:9, on the one who was rich becoming

⁴¹ In *Sermo 137,2,2* and *4,4* (PL 38,755) Augustine reflects on how the true shepherd is distinguished from the hired hand and the thief (cf. Jn 10:9,11). "Christ who is already in heaven suffers here as long as his church is suffering ... Because of the one bond of love the head is one even with the feet." (*s. 137,2,2*). "Christ is the gate in the head, the shepherd in the body ... Who is the one who enters by the gate? The one who enters by Christ. And who is that? The one who imitates Christ's passion, who understands Christ's humility, and understands that while God has become man for us, he himself as a human being is not God, but just a man." (*s. 137,4,4*).

⁴² *Sermo 123,1 & 4*. "Let man be ashamed of being proud, seeing that God became humble" (*s. 123,1*). "Fear Christ up above, recognize him down below. Have Christ up above lavishing bounty, recognize him here needing charity. Here he's poor, there he's rich. That Christ is poor for us here, he tells us himself: *I was hungry, thirsty, naked, a stranger, in prison*. And to some he said *You helped me*, to some *You didn't help me*." (*s. 123,4*).

⁴³ In *Sermo 210,3* there is reference to the example of Christ's humility, and in paragraph 12 of the same sermon there is commentary on Mt 25:35-40, but the themes are not explicitly linked.

poor, and also to Phil. 2:6-8, on the one in the form of God accepting the form of a slave and humbling himself, even to death on the cross. The homily then continues:

[God's] poverty is being recommended to you. *Hold faith with a neighbour in his poverty* (Sir. 22:23). Certainly in this instance there can be no wavering about the application, or blurring of the meaning, of that maxim. Take the word “neighbour” as meaning the name “Christ,” and take it so in humility. In humility, after all, you will match the humble one; in humility you will grasp him as the exalted one. Take him humbly and understand him as neighbour ... Hold faith with Christ in his poverty so that you may also enjoy his good times.⁴⁴

Mt 10:42a, in contrast to Matthew 25, says nothing explicitly of Christ’s self-identification with “the least of mine.” Nonetheless, Augustine appears to have interpreted the phrase as it appears in Mt 10 precisely in the sense inspired by Matthew 25. i.e., the neighbour – and in this case a poor neighbour – that Christ has become to human beings by identifying himself with them. This poor neighbour, in the spirit of Phil. 2:6-8, is designated “the humble one.”⁴⁵ Christ, the neighbour, the poor one, the humble one, the exalted one: such is the pattern here and in many other places. It is evident that “the humble one” as such would not be at all out of place also in Augustine’s commentary on Matthew 25. We are left to marvel then at its overall absence.

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⁴⁴ *Sermo 41,7.*

⁴⁵ See *De catechizandis rudibus* 4,8: “... Christ who made himself a neighbour to human beings by loving them when they were not close to him but were wandering far from him ... the same Lord Jesus Christ, God-man, [who] is at the same time the evidence of divine love toward us and the example of human humility among us.”

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