

Perquisite Reading for Lent II (To be handed out on Lent 1)

LENTEN FORMATION PROGRAM 2024

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Notes taken from Images of Pilgrimage: Paradise and Wilderness in Christian Spirituality: by Robert Crouse.

ST. AUGUSTINE

Passing on to consider the interpretation of images of pilgrimage in the ongoing development of Christian spirituality in the life and writings of St. Augustine, we do not leave behind the scriptures of the Old and New Testament.

To begin, we might consider a reading “in of ourselves into the Word” and will of God; “a reading of ourselves”, into the paradise of God, where, in a fundamental and altogether crucial sense, we already are.

Our resource is with the spirituality of Saint Augustine of Hippo. We place him first in the context of early Christian spirituality in general.

We have been considering the relationship of the images of Christian Pilgrimage as a form of participating in a kind of paradise, in the tension we spoke of earlier between wilderness and paradise.

It is not surprising that the Church should think of itself as representing paradise. Saint Irenaeus remarks: “the church is planted as a paradise in this world”. Clearly, the Church is a community of the new Adam, and, indeed, of the new Eve, the community in which the enmity of Cain and Abel is reversed by Christian amity and seems on the surface to return to Eden in this world.

Although the return to Paradise has an eschatological (future and end times) dimension, it is also present reality in the Church’s life.

The understanding of baptism as a sign of that return to paradise, the lost and promised land, is implicit from the beginning in the imagery of Exodus, so closely associated with baptism in the Scriptures.

In early Christianity, this Paradisical image serves as the fundamental image of renewal and reform, and it is thus the basic image of spiritual pilgrimage in both individual and corporate dimensions.

A foreshadowing of what is to come, it is a sign or image of what is coming, and on several levels. What is coming is fulfilled in the soul of the redeemed person in the community of the Church.

For the Desert fathers, and for many others, seeking the philosophic live, the integrity of paradise could be recovered only in the freedom of the wilderness, far removed from the affairs of the imperial Church. The aim was to recover in the wilderness, the last integrity of Adam; to show how Christian holiness, could overcome the enmity of humankind and nature.

All this belongs to the image of a paradise; but there was more. In the Latin west, in the fourth century, important changes were taking place in Christian spiritual perspectives; changes which would define western Christian spirituality, through the Middle Ages, through the Reformation down to our own time. St. Augustine was the great architect of that transformation.

The Integrity at Eden is not the pilgrim's destination says St. Augustine, “we shall be changed into something better.” That is the watchword of this view.

St. Augustine's great mentor Saint Ambrose of Milan is attributed these remarkable lines: “*oh, truly necessary sin of Adam, which, by the death of Christ is done away! Oh happy fault, which merited such and so great a redeemer*”.

“*Where sin abounded, graced did much more abound*”. (Romans 5: 20) but whatever may be the Pauline and Ambrosian anticipation of the position, its full elaboration belongs to Saint Augustine.

In the cyclic view of paradise, as a return to Eden, the wilderness must be seen as interlude, delaying our return to the innocent integrity of Adam in the garden. But if the New Adam is not just original integrity reconstituted, but something new and eternally more, then wildness is not just remedial discipline (though it is that of course), but the sphere of spiritual activity, which results in something better.

Maturity in Christ is something more than the innocence of Adam. It is this latter view which specifies the terms of pilgrimage for St. Augustine and his successors.

The spirituality of St Augustine is the spirituality of pilgrimage, and abounds in the images of wilderness and paradise, of exile and repatriation. This theme runs through all his works, but perhaps it is most familiar, and most accessible in The Confessions, his own odyssey of soul, the story of his liberation from the fertility of the social educational and professional conventions of a dying age from the “baren land” he had made himself, to find a new principle of thought and action in the paradise of the

Word of God. thus, the work, which begins as a sort of autobiography, turns into a consideration of the nature of the soul, and concludes as a meditation on the creation narrative of Genesis.

St Augustine's pilgrimage is the pilgrimage of love, and a spirituality of rational will, as it inspires to the infinite and absolute good.

Passage in book 8 of the confessions clarifies the meaning of that journey:

“By its own weight, a body inclines towards its own place. Weight does not always tend towards the lowest place, but to its own place. A stone falls, but fire rises. They move according to their own weights; they seek their own places. Oil poured into water rises to the surface, water on oil sinks below the oil. They act according to their own weights; they seek their own places. Things out of place are restless they find their places, and they rest.”

“My love is my weight; whatsoever I am moved, I am moved there by love. By the gift of the Spirit we are set on fire, and are born aloft, we burn, and we are on the way. We climb the ascents, which are in the heart, and sing the songs of degrees. With the fire, with a good fire, we burn and go on, we go up to the peace of Jerusalem. For I rejoice who said to me, “we will go into the house of the Lord”. There good-will will place us, so that we shall wish nothing other than to remain there forever.”

It is precisely in the human will that at St. Augustine finds the possibility of a wayward love, which fixes upon some finite thing as though it were the absolute and perfect good.

Augustinian spirituality has the character of a recovery from bondage, and exodus from Egypt. The conversion of love from finite goods, to infinite and perfect good, which is the promised land of paradise, and the prodigal return from a distant country. The conversion, the ascent, is a movement away from the multiplicity and temporality of worldly experience, turning inward in search of a vision of the unity and stability of all things, and their divine source.

Only through the meditation of the Divine Word could paradise become a home. Because of fallen man's preoccupation with external and the temporal, his memory of his paradise is dim and his way unclear, and therefore, the prompting of the Word, externally, and temporarily uttered, and the economy of salvation is a necessary starting point.

Augustine undertakes an exposition of the spiritual pilgrimage of all creation, in the form of an exodus of the creation narrative of genesis. First, creation is seen, in it's discursive, multiplicity, and time and space; finally, it is seen in its sabbath rest in the unfathomable unity of Divine activity, in which motion and rest are identical.

It is by conversion, a turning back to God, that we attain the reality of our true life. That is the pilgrimage of all creation, the meaning of its motion, and it is within that context that the pilgrimage of human love is understood.

It is the principle of love that informs the spirituality of St. Augustine, a principle that informs the idea of pilgrimage for generations to come.

Dante's Divine Comedy takes up this theme of pilgrimage as love. The poem is the culminating work of medieval spiritual genius, has the shape of romance, transfigured in a new style, and fittingly, concludes with the image of paradise as the white celestial rose, the image of purified, romantic love. The final line of the final Canto celebrates love, the love that moves the sun and the other stars.