

Young Augustine: Both Catholic and Manichee¹

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There are many problematic aspects to Augustine's Manichean sojourn. Even the length of that venture has long been known to constitute a problem.² Also problematic (though hitherto unrecognized as such) is Augustine's claimed discovery, from Ambrose's sermons, of Paul's distinction between the letter and the spirit (2 Cor 3.6).³ The repeated assertion (5.14.24; 6.4.6)⁴ that this discovery swept away Augustine's Manichean prejudices against the Old Testament and the Law and the prophets is not supported by the available evidence. First, 2 Cor 3.6 is conspicuously absent from Augustine's earliest biblical references.⁵ Secondly, if Augustine's attitude to the prophets of the Old Testament had been so radically changed by that discovery, why then did he, in a typically Manichean fashion, refuse to read the prophet Isaiah as recommended by the wily Ambrose (9.5.13)?⁶

Both the above cases, first of the virtual absence of 2 Cor 3.6 from the early works of Augustine, secondly of his aversion to Isaiah, raise some serious questions, if not about the formality of his baptism, then certainly about just when his Manicheism finally expired.⁷ On the other hand, and in a more general perspective, it can be asked whether Augustine's relations with Manicheism were as simple and as straightforward as first impressions of the *Confessions* would imply.

The reader of the *Confessions* has the general, but distinct impression that the nineteen-year-old Augustine left the Catholic Church of his childhood for the Manichees, then some "nine years" later, abandoned Manicheism and returned to that Church. From time immemorial this has also been the conventional view of Augustine scholars. But from what Augustine says, such a break from the *Catholica* would have been well nigh impossible. Thus he refers to "that religion which had been implanted in us in our boyhood and which had been, as it were, *interwoven in the very marrow of*

our being.”⁸ If this union had been so strong and deeply rooted, the question arises as to how the young Augustine of nineteen years could ever have survived a rupture from that faith.

Moreover, in view of the above entwining of Catholic Christianity with the very marrow of Augustine’s infantile being, desertion of that faith would therefore have been a protracted and agonizing ordeal. Consequently it should have been the subject of much emphasis in the *Confessions*. However, it is significant that while Augustine makes an unequivocal statement about leaving the Manichees (“I therefore resolved that the Manicheans must be abandoned”),⁹ no such corresponding statement is made in the third book (where it belongs), or elsewhere in the *Confessions* to my knowledge, about leaving the Catholic Church.¹⁰ A similar observation applies to the verbs of explicitly returning to that Church.¹¹

At the very end of the fifth book of the *Confessions* there is an enigmatical statement which purports to signal Augustine’s return to catechumenical status in the Catholic Church, when he declares (“disconcertingly” as R. J. O’Connell observes¹²): “Therefore I determined to continue as a catechumen in the Catholic Church” (5.14.25).¹³ Gibbs and Montgomery, in their well-known edition of the *Confessions*,¹⁴ have trouble with the implication of the above passage, namely that Augustine still considered himself a Catholic catechumen after about “nine years” as a Manichee and so they claim that he really meant to say that he resolved to reassume that position of catechumen. But this is repeatedly contradicted by the words of Augustine himself, as quoted above and elsewhere. Regarding the same passage in the *Confessions*, John K. Ryan, in the notes to his translation,¹⁵ makes the interesting interpretation that because of his mother’s initial enrollment of him as a catechumen, Augustine considered himself to have never changed from that status, even during his ten years as a Manichee. This appears to be nearer the truth, as will be seen.

On a second occasion, Augustine implies his continuing catechumenical status while also being a Manichee, when he declares during his examination of conscience in the sixth book of the *Confessions* (6.11.18): “I will fix my feet on that step where my parents had placed me as a child,”¹⁶ as if he had been on that step all along, though in a vacillating manner.

Thirdly, the same understanding is yet more explicit in a passage of an earlier work, *The Advantage of Believing* of 391/2. He observes there that the Manichees were much more skilful in ridiculing the beliefs of others than they were in proving their own.¹⁷ This comparison brings his thoughts

to his own religious status at that time, of which status he says: "But what shall I say about myself, I who was *already* a Catholic Christian? — (*Sed de me quid dicam, qui jam catholicus christianus eram*)?"¹⁸ The use of the imperfect tense (*eram*), together with *jam* (meaning "already", or "by then") clearly signifies that Augustine considered himself a Catholic Christian (*i. e.* a catechumen) at that time, while also *simultaneously* being a Manichean hearer. Had he used the pluperfect tense: "I who *had been* a Catholic Christian- (*[ego] qui catholicus christianus fueram*)" then this would have implied his appreciation of the fact that he had lost his status of catechumen on becoming a Manichean hearer. Such recognition is absent.

In the fourth place, there is yet another reference later on in the same work, to Augustine's unchanged status of catechumen during his Manichean sojourn of some ten years. Writing of the influence upon him of Bishop Ambrose, Augustine says: "And I had determined *to remain* (*esse*) a catechumen in the Church to which my parents had committed me until I should find what I wanted, or convince myself that the search need not be made."¹⁹

Finally and fifthly, there is yet more conclusive evidence from a letter Augustine wrote in 396, just prior to his elevation to the status of auxiliary bishop of Hippo Regius. His then fellow-presbyter Casulanus had written him about what days of the week should be fast-days. In reply Augustine says:

I will tell you the answer given to my questions on this subject by the venerable Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, by whom I was baptized. When my mother was with me in that city, *I, as being only a catechumen*, felt no concern about these questions.²⁰

The question was whether Augustine's mother should fast on Saturdays, as had been the custom in her former North African parish, or not fast, as was the custom in her present city of residence, namely Milan.²¹ This episode must have arisen quite soon after Monica's arrival in Milan (6.1.1), and for two obvious reasons. In the first place, she was exceedingly devout,²² consequently the difference in customs would have struck her almost immediately after arrival and she would have wanted a prompt and authoritative answer, whence Augustine's asking Ambrose about the matter. Secondly, Augustine says that he "felt no concern about these questions" since he was then "only a catechumen." Again, this indifference obviously belongs to his early days in Milan, before he had come under the spell of Ambrose.²³ This is completely compatible with his four other statements above.²⁴ So it would follow that Augustine considered himself a Catholic

catechumen at the time indicated in the beginning of book six in the *Confessions*, when Monica arrived in Milan (in the late spring of 385).²⁵

Therefore, contrary to the traditional and long-held view of scholars, not only is there no concrete evidence that Augustine left the Catholic Church when he joined the Manichees, but rather does the evidence show, as he himself says on the above five occasions, he *remained* a Catholic catechumen during the very same ten years or so that he was an active Manichee.

If scholars had been more aware of the nature of the *Confessions* as script for a dramatic reading²⁶ and the limitations that this mode of discourse imposed,²⁷ then perhaps some of them would have thought of looking for the evidence shown above. Part of the reason for not realizing this intent of the author was a lack of appreciation for the influence upon the *Confessions* of Augustine's earlier passionate love of the theatre (1.10.16, 1.17.27; 3.2.2-4).²⁸ That love is very understandable, for after all, what else was Augustine's own profession of rhetoric, if not essentially that of dramatic theatre?

Granted then that Augustine remained a catechumen during his ten years or so with the Manichees, as well as the nineteen years prior to that sojourn, this makes one realize just what an incredible silence he has maintained about his life as a catechumen during those twenty-nine years or so. All that is known in this regard from the text of the *Confessions* is that at the instigation of his pious mother, the infant Augustine received the sacrament of catechumenical initiation soon after birth (1.11.17) and so was received into the body of the Church.²⁹ This ceremony, called the *sacramenta*, consisted of the signing with the cross, the laying on of hands, the holy salt and the blessed bread.³⁰ By implication (through the tenses used) he also received these catechumenical *sacramenta* on many occasions thereafter (*ibid.*).³¹ It is also known that Augustine fell grievously ill as a young boy and that immediate arrangements were made for his baptism, but this was deferred when his sickness departed (1.11.17).

This prolonging of the catechumenical state by a dilatory approach to baptism was not uncommon in Augustine's milieu.³² But it could be significant that though he considered himself a catechumen, the word catechumen is not predicated once of himself prior to the fifth book of the *Confessions*, when he makes the statement that he determined to continue as a catechumen in the Catholic Church (5.14.25),³³ as seen above. This silence about his catechumenical life over a period of some twenty-nine years (5.3.3) also deftly avoids raising the question of what happened to that spiritual life

during the ten years or so that he was a Manichee. The same also applies to his Manichean spirituality over this same period.³⁴ Both these omissions would have been necessary in order to avoid distracting complications in a script destined for a dramatic reading.

Since Augustine remained a Catholic catechumen during his Manichean sojourn, it would appear that at least some sporadic participation in the Catholic liturgy also occurred during those years. As a catechumen, such attendance would have been limited to that part of the service featuring the sermon which was also open to pagans, heretics and Jews.³⁵ The open-door policy for the preliminaries to the secret part of the liturgy, as well as his public status as a catechumen, also explain Augustine's frequent presence at Ambrose's sermons (5.13.23 – 5.14.24; 6.4.6) even before his first decision that the Manichees had to be abandoned (5.14.25).

But in the first place, by embracing Manicheism the young Augustine could also have faced civil penalties, because the Manichees were under imperial proscription.³⁶ Secondly, and more pertinent to present considerations, the young Augustine could have found himself under a ban from the *Catholica* had his Manichean membership become known to the ecclesiastical authorities.³⁷ Since (as seen above) he did not lose his catechumenical status prior to his arrival in Milan in 384, he must therefore have been a clandestine Manichee.

That Augustine was a secret member of the Manichean religion is even admitted by himself in the opening of the fourth book of the *Confessions* where he says of his Manichean sojourn:

We were seduced and we seduced others, deceived and deceiving by various desires, both openly (*palam*) by the so-called liberal arts and secretly (*occulte*) in the name of a false religion, proud in the one, superstitious in the other and everywhere vain. (4.1.1)³⁸

The resulting religious double-life can now explain a previously enigmatical passage in the *Confessions* where Augustine refers to himself as having been physically a member of the Catholic Church, yet unknown to himself at that time, he did not really belong to it:

I spoke to your faithful little ones, *my fellow citizens, from whom I was an exile, although I knew it not*. Full of words and folly as I was, I said to them, "Why, then, does the soul, which God has created, fall into error?" (4.15.26. Italics are added.)

Apparently therefore, prior to his arrival in Milan in 384, Augustine was but poorly instructed as a catechumen and so at the age of nineteen saw no harm in widening his religious experience by becoming a secret Manichee. (The reasons for this will be seen later.) The excuse of ignorance seems fortified by several references in the *Confessions*, especially towards the end of the third book, soon after the encounter with the Manichees, when the text echoes with the laments about his former ignorance: "I did not know . . ." (3.7.12), "I did not know . . ." (3.7.13), "I did not know . . ." (3.7.14) and "I was ignorant of such things" (3.10.18). A similar lament is found in the closing chapters of the fourth book, concerned with Augustine's life as a Manichee, when he says of his clever book-learning at that time: "What did it profit me . . ." (4.16.28), "What did all this profit me . . ." (4.16.29), "What did it profit me . . ." (4.16.30) and "What did all this profit me . . ." (4.16.31). Doubtless, the guilt deriving from those years as a secret Manichee while also being publicly a Catholic catechumen, is an important part of the larger guilt which permeates the *Confessions* as a whole.³⁹

Likewise, Augustine's later realization of the extreme sinfulness of that double religious life also appears to have been an important source of his repeated self-accusations of sacrilege in relation to Manicheism. Thus, at the end of the fourth book, he asks what profit came from his cleverness in understanding books when he "erred crookedly and with foul sacrilege against all holy doctrine" (4.16.31). In the next book he accuses Mani of "sacrilegious presumption" for his bizarre teachings about the heavens (5.5.8). Again, after his sickness as a Manichee in Rome, he recovered his bodily health, while, as he says, "still diseased within my sacrilegious heart" (5.9.16). A little farther along in the text, he says of his Manichean-inspired picture of good and evil as two immense masses he says: "from this pestilential beginning other sacrileges pursued me" (5.10.20). Finally, he accused the Manichees of teaching "horrible sacrileges of both heart and tongue" (7.2.3).

When Augustine arrived in Milan in 384, the behavior of Bishop Ambrose could imply that he was well aware that he had before him a catechumen who was also a crypto-Manichee. After all, Augustine was the official appointee of the Manichean faction in Rome (5.13.23). Repeatedly, Ambrose would not even condescend to talk privately with the brilliant young orator (6.3.3; 4) who would have presented himself as a catechumen.⁴⁰ For his part, Augustine apparently thought that he was deceiving Ambrose about his true religious status. Thus, after recounting Ambrose's praises of Augustine's own mother, Augustine says: "But he did not know what sort of son she had, for I doubted all things, and I thought that the way to life could not be found"

(6.2.2). Therefore as observed above, as Ambrose was undoubtedly aware, that same orator came to Milan under the patronage of the Manichees at Rome (5.13.23). He also arrived at a crucial stage in Ambrose's struggles against the whole pagan faction in Rome.⁴¹ Deprived of their traditional privileges, they were desperately fighting for their very existence. In going to Rome therefore, Augustine was stepping into the arena where the momentous struggle of intrigues and counter-intrigues between pagans and Christians was in full progress. To be a Manichee in that environment was to be a pagan and therefore an enemy of both church and state.

On the other hand, it is important to realize that at that time relations between the Catholics and the Manichees in Augustine's North Africa, would have lacked the confrontational intensity of the Milan-versus-Rome struggle, and so were not as hostile as would appear from his later polemics against his former Manichean coreligionists. J. J. O'Meara for one, has observed that in the peculiar religious dynamics of Augustine's Africa, the Manichees were closer to the Catholics than these latter were to their schismatic brethren, the Donatists.⁴² These last-mentioned were possessed of a certain paranoia in that (as William Frend puts it), they were ever fearful that Catholicism in Numidia "served as a cloak of respectability for the dreaded religion of the Manichees."⁴³

But any affinity whatever between Catholicism and Manicheism in North Africa is the very opposite of the impression given by the *Confessions*. There, Augustine depicts his encounter with the Manichees during his spiritual journey as being an accident like that of falling down, when he says: "I fell in with certain men, doting in their pride" (3.6.10).⁴⁴ Even worse, for him the experience was like falling into a deep and dark pit, for as he says of that sojourn:

Almost nine years passed, in which I wallowed 'in the mire of the deep' [Ps 86.3]. and in the darkness of error (*in illo limo profundi ac tenebris falsitatis*), and although I often strove to rise out of it, I was all the more grievously thrust down again. (3.11.20)

Part of the reason for this contrast between the supernatural Light which is so much the object of Augustine's spiritual quest (7.10.16) and the darkness of Manicheism (above) would seem to lie in dramatic exigencies; a plot becomes all the more gripping when commonalities and ambiguities are eliminated and two forces are starkly polarized as uncompromising good versus insidious evil. This aspect of plot is extremely relevant to under-

standing correctly the *Confessions* which, as already mentioned, has the character of a script for a dramatic reading before a live audience.

A second reason for the contrast is that it enabled Augustine, as author of the *Confessions*, to distance himself more effectively from his former Manichean coreligionists. This was the more desirable in that, as already mentioned, the latter were but one of the many pagan cults under both ecclesiastical and imperial proscription in the newly Christianized empire. Yet a third possible reason for the stark contrast between the two religions could have been as a rhetorical tactic to distract the audience's attention from the thesis of this study, namely that the young Augustine was for ten years or so, simultaneously a member of *both* religions.

Augustine's consistently negative attitude towards Manicheism obscures the fact that the latter had much in common with Catholicism. Manicheism was, as one author observed, a church solidly hierarchical and resolutely universal and, at least from its Christian aspect, founded on the gospel of Jesus Christ⁴⁵ whom they worshipped.⁴⁶ As such, Manicheism was a worthy rival of the *Catholica*. In the words of W. J. Sparrow Simpson:

A singular feature of Manes' writing is his anxiety to claim for his teaching that it was identical with Christian principles, and for himself that he had direct communion with and authority from Jesus Christ by the appointment of God the Father.⁴⁷

Even further, in its contempt for the Old Testament (which was accepted by the *Catholica*), Manicheism saw itself as the pure form of Christianity undistorted by the archaic regulations of Judaism.⁴⁸ Peter Brown puts it well in his famous biography, when he says of the Manichees:

Above all, they were a group of radical Christians. To them, the Catholics were mere "semi-Christians". Christ was a central figure in their system; and He appeared precisely as Augustine had been led to expect- as the principle of Wisdom *par excellence*.⁴⁹

Understandably then, a great part of Manicheism's attractiveness for Augustine lay in its reverence for the name of Christ (3.6.10), a quality lacking at that time in the otherwise inspiring *Hortensius* of Cicero (3.4.8). Of this latter discovery he says:

In so great a blaze only this checked me, that Christ's name was not in it. For this name, O Lord, according to your mercy, this name of my Savior, your Son, my tender heart had holily drunken

in with my mother's milk and kept deep down within itself. What-ever lacked this name, no matter how learned and polished and veracious it was, could not wholly capture me. (3.4.8)

But in contrast to Cicero, Manicheism possessed a central role for Christ.⁵⁰ The true believer saw him as hanging from every tree in the world, for as Faustus says: "the earth conceives and brings forth the mortal Jesus, who, as hanging from every tree, is the life and salvation of men."⁵¹ Again, according to the Manichean mythology, as Jesus the Friend, he was sent down to earth to wake Adam from a deep sleep and help him to find his proper manner of redemption.⁵²

Considering this important role of Jesus as divine mediator in Manicheism, it is puzzling to see Augustine as the disillusioned Manichee looking for Christ the Mediator as if he had never known him thus before (7.18.24). However, this would be an understandable simplification for the *Confessions* as a dramatic presentation. On the other hand, if Jesus the Way (Jn 14.6) had been such a powerful revelation to Augustine in his reappraisal of Catholicism (7.18.24; 7.19.25), then the question arises as to why Jn 14.6 is so absent from Augustine's earliest works?⁵³ Again, Jesus also occupied a unique position in Manicheism in being the last in a series before Mani, who regarded him as a Divine Being.⁵⁴ Yet despite these important roles of Christ as divine mediator in Manicheism, it is disconcerting to read that Augustine says of himself soon after his disillusionment with that religion: "I conceived my Lord Christ only as a man of surpassing wisdom, whom no other man could equal." (7.19.25).⁵⁵ On the other hand, for the Manichees Christ was not born of woman but simply appeared on earth.⁵⁶ Finally, also revelatory on the role of Jesus in Manicheism is the fact that in a fourth-century Manichean psalm-book (found by Prof. Carl Schmidt in Egypt in 1930) of more than two hundred sixty psalms, besides frequent invocations of Jesus, some three dozen of the psalms are also addressed explicitly to him.⁵⁷ Mindful of the claim of Augustine that he had as it were, drunk in his great love of the name of Christ with his mother's milk (3.4.8), it is understandable therefore that this name was a powerful feature of Manicheism which rendered it extremely attractive to the young Augustine. This is evident in the *Confessions* where he describes his encounter with the Manichees and how the names of the Trinity were ever on their tongues (3.6.10). That these names (particularly that of Christ) were used as a bait by which he was trapped is stated explicitly in the text, when, addressing God, he describes the Manichees as:

[Those] in whose mouth were the snares of the devil and a very birdlime (*viscum*) confectioned by mixing together the syllables of your name [God the Father], and the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the name of the Paraclete, our comforter, the Holy Spirit. (3.6.10)

That Augustine was there thinking of himself as a bird, stuck on a tree-branch coated with viscous birdlime (*viscum*), is even more evident in another account of the same entrapment when he says of the Manichees: "They did to us what deceitful bird-catchers are wont to do, who fix lime-smeared branches (*viscatos surculos*) near water to deceive thirsty birds."⁵⁸ Again, but more implicitly, the same importance of the name of Christ in Augustine's attraction to the Manichees is found near the end of the fifth book where Augustine says that he could not remain a Manichee when he then preferred many philosophers to them (5.14.25). But as he says in the same place, the philosophers were without the saving name of Christ, so he refused utterly to commit his soul's sickness to them. Tacitly implied here is the highly significant fact that Manicheism, with its emphasis on the importance of Christ, had actually been fulfilling that role during the ten years or so when he belonged to that sect. In view of these considerations therefore, the question should not be when did Augustine desert the darkness of Manicheism for the light of Catholic Christianity, but rather when did he disabuse himself of the notion that the Manichees were the *real* Christians.

Thus phrased, the question reinforces the above motive for Augustine's double religious life, in that the young Augustine could have frequented both churches in order to widen his search for the saving name of Christ. That at least some of the Catholic clergy could have been tolerant of such searching is suggested by the incident of the bishop (also a former [?] Manichee, 3.12.21) to whom Monica, his angry mother,⁵⁹ went to ask him to reason with her heretical son. Evidently, cognisant of her son's double religious life, she no longer regarded him as a genuine Catholic, whence her famous dream of Augustine in relation to the wooden ruler (3.11.19-20). The clergyman's advice was merely for the holy woman to pray for her son and to leave the young man to his inquiries, when he would eventually find out the errors of Manicheism for himself (3.12.21).

But viewed against Augustine's later dark picture of Manicheism, this was an astonishing reply indeed, seeing that Manicheism was under double prohibition, as already mentioned. The bishop could have threatened the young catechumen with both civil and religious penalties. In default of such coercive steps, the bishop's verdict must be seen as a most important tacit

approval of Augustine's Manichean allegiance, while *simultaneously* being a Catholic catechumen; a deception, which later and in penitential retrospect was to cause him so much regret. But the bishop, with his laissez-faire attitude, was located in North Africa, and not in the Milan-Rome field of politico-religious tension.

If the above episode of the interview with the bishop is any indication, it is not surprising that the Manichees, with their secret infiltrations of the *Catholica* posed a problem which became a chronic one, for as Frend observes about the North African Catholic church:

Despite the efforts of St. Augustine and his friends to expose the Manichees, there is evidence to suggest that a certain amount of secret Manichaeism persisted within the Catholic Church.⁶⁰

It is understandable therefore, that as some conspicuous cases testify, suspicion about the North African Catholic Church persisted in the Italian Popes for centuries after Augustine's time.⁶¹ Further, the supreme irony of all this is that during his own lifetime, Augustine himself was more than once accused of secretly being a Manichee,⁶² an opinion which still persists in certain quarters, even today.

For their part, the Manichees, far from requiring their converts to abandon their previous religious beliefs actually encouraged reconsideration of those beliefs for forming the well cultivated mind, thereby widening the search for divine truth (5.6.11).⁶³ Consequently, the young Augustine would have been welcome in their midst without renouncing his Catholicism. Moreover, as a sect under both ecclesiastical and imperial prohibition such clandestine membership would have been to their advantage in promoting infiltration of both the Catholic Church and society at large. However, with the *Catholica* the welcoming would not have been reciprocated, since having an exclusive claim on the truth, this church was far less accommodating. An example of this in the *Confessions* is that the Catholics claimed exclusive use of the church in Milan against the Christian Arians (9.7.15). But again this happened in Milan and not in Augustine's North Africa.

Undoubtedly the atmosphere of secrecy which permeated the prohibited religion of Manicheism must have also have greatly increased its appeal to the young Augustine of nineteen years. Even as a mature author in his mid-forties, when writing the *Confessions* he displays a persistent love of secrets and secrecy. This love is manifested in the first place by the vocabulary of the *Confessions* where the commonest words denoting secrets and secrecy

number just over eighty, of which about two-thirds apply to God and also His interactions with Augustine.⁶⁴ Secondly, many prominent phrases throughout the work repeatedly remind the audience of the secret and intimate relationship of Augustine with the God who is "most secret and most present to all."⁶⁵ He is therefore a hidden and silent God (1.18.29), who also operates in secret and providential ways (5.6.11, 5.8.14; 7.6.10). For his part, Augustine expresses fear that his own most secret and even unknown sins might cut him off from God's healing (1.5.6; 10.37.60). These more obvious examples from the *Confessions* illustrate Augustine's enormous fascination with the aspect of secrecy in his relations with God. The work was written in Augustine's mid-forties. Understandably, the appeal of secrecy could have been even irresistible for him as a bright and curious nineteen-year-old, when he first encountered the mysterious Manichees.

It is something of a shock to be faced with the fact of what appears to be the former religious ambivalence of the austere author of the *Confessions*. However, there were extenuating circumstances deriving generally from the enforced proximity between Manicheism and Catholicism in young Augustine's Africa, as has been observed. Secondly, the deception first occurred during Augustine's passionate and curious teenage years (3.4.7) when he hungered so intensely for truth (3.6.10). In the third place, another mitigating circumstance is that, prior to his arrival in Milan in 384, Augustine's religious instruction was apparently very elementary, as mentioned above. Finally, there was the significant and related factor of the deferred baptism which dated back to his childhood (1.11.17-18). This negligence, about which something should next be said, was legitimized and reinforced at a later date by the indulgent bishop's advice to Augustine's angry mother (3.12.21), as seen above.

Last, but by no means least, precisely because he was from earliest years a catechumen who had not made the final solemn commitment of baptism, he had parental consent for all kinds of sinful indulgences.⁶⁶ Augustine was but one of those many catechumens whose parents had postponed indefinitely that final commitment of baptism.⁶⁷ But, as Van der Meer observes:

Such an attitude was bound to produce the impression among the young that they were perfectly free to sin up to the time of their baptism, which could after all take place at an advanced age.⁶⁸

This was precisely the great evil that Augustine later saw in the delay of his own baptism (1.11.17-18), so that in later life he became a leading exponent of infant baptism.⁶⁹ The older Augustine had come to regard the

combination of the catechumenical status as linked with a dilatory approach to baptism as an encouragement for a prolonged period of sinning, especially because in his own youthful case it had also led to the sacrilegious condition of becoming a secret Manichee while simultaneously being a Catholic catechumen. He therefore spoke from the profound regret of personal experience. Most significantly in this regard, in his mid-forties when writing his *Confessions*, the strident voices of his indulgent parents were still ringing in his ears, for as he says:

How then is it that even now there rings in my ears from all sides, concerning one thing and another, the cry, "Let him be! Let him do it! He is not yet baptized!" (1.11.18)

It is small wonder then, that still unbaptized at the insecure age of nineteen he indulged himself yet again when confronted by the mysterious Manichees with their constant talk of the Holy Trinity (3.6.10), and of his beloved Christ. Consequently, the previously mentioned secretive character of the Manichees and their love of the "suffering Jesus" who was "crucified throughout the visible universe"⁷⁰ were irresistible to a bright and curious nineteen-year-old with his passionate love of the name of Christ on the one hand (3.4.8; 5.14.25) and with a licence to sin and his fascination for secrecy on the other. Accordingly, in the *Confessions* Augustine compares his encounter with the Manichees to meeting that bold woman of Solomon's riddle (Prov 9.13-18) and so saw them as inviting him to "freely eat of secret bread and drink of sweet stolen waters" (3.6.11). These suggestive, enigmatical verses appear as early as 388/9 in Augustine's *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, again in relation to heresies in general and Manicheism in particular.⁷¹ In his exegesis, Augustine says of Adam, presumably in regard to Eve:

Let him not receive from her the forbidden food, that is, the deceit of the heretics with their many promises of knowledge and the disclosure of the so-called secrets, by which their error is made more hidden so as better to deceive.⁷²

Some six years later, in 394/5, Augustine commented on Rom 7.11,⁷³ where Paul writes that sin, finding its opportunity in the commandment, deceived him and by the commandment slew him. Augustine saw Paul as saying this, because just as the fruit of forbidden desire is sweeter, so secret sins are also sweeter, but this sweetness is deadly. Then, the bold woman of Solomon's riddle is again invoked. Both these extracts are suggestive of the strong appeal that secret sins, especially those of heresy, had for the

younger Augustine, whence his fascination with the prohibited Manicheism.

But Augustine of the *Confessions* also saw the bold woman of Solomon's riddle as an epitome of Manicheism not only because of her "secret bread", but also for her "sweet stolen waters." So likewise, corresponding to this second aspect, the secret sin of theft assumes interesting manifestations in the *Confessions*, beginning with the boy Augustine's theft of food from his parents' cellar (1.19.30). But above all, there is

the well-known theft of the pears,⁷⁴ committed late one night (*nocte intempesta*, 2.4.9) and so in secrecy under the cover of darkness, "the mother of the wicked."⁷⁵

There are also other thefts which fascinated Augustine of the *Confessions*, to the extent that he found them worthy of mention in his narrative. To the first theft of food from this parents' cellar there correspond other thefts in the last book of autobiography; those thefts of wine by his mother Monica as a young girl (9.8.18). The sixth book of the *Confessions* contains yet another theft, yet in broad daylight and concerning the would-be thief when he attempts to break into the shops of the silver-smiths (6.9.14-15). From these various considerations on the sweetness of secret sins, it can again be better appreciated why, while remaining a Catholic catechumen, the nineteen-year-old Augustine also became a clandestine hearer of the Manichean religion.

This hitherto unrecognized dual religious life seems to be the correct way to understand the character of Augustine's Manichean sojourn. Consequently, despite a lengthy tradition of misinterpretation, his famous conversion of the eighth book of the *Confessions* cannot be a true-to-life description of his "return" to the Catholicism which he had never abandoned (at least in his own mind). Rather does it now appear as a dramatic representation of his final and resolute rejection of the sweet secret sinfulness of Manicheism (8.9.21-8.10.24) and a firm decision for the solemn public commitment (like the orator Victorinus, 8.2.3-5) to baptism in the Catholic Church in which he had been for all too long a dilatory and sinfully deceitful crypto-Manichean catechumen.

However, this latter interpretation of the conversion, with its many ambiguities, does not make for as dramatic a public reading as the former. That version, with its "return" to Catholicism, has far more audience-appeal, highlighting as it does, the stark polarization between the insidious evil of

Manicheism on the one hand, and the uncompromising good of Catholicism on the other; an appeal only too well appreciated by Augustine the brilliant orator and former passionate lover of the theatre. Just how correct his profound insight was, has been amply demonstrated, even at the material level, by the countless editions and translations of the *Confessions* which have appeared down through the centuries.

Notes

1. The author wishes to express his gratitude to Fr. Allan Fitzgerald O.S.A. for his helpful comments and also to Villanova University for the privilege of accessing their Augustine Concordance Project. The first version of this article was read at the Annual Conference of the Canadian Society for Patristic Studies in June 1993 at Carleton University in Ottawa.
2. The period of nine years is claimed in over half a dozen places in his works: *De moribus Manichaeorum* 19.68 (388), *De moribus ecclesiae Catholicae* 18.34 (388), *De utilitate credendi* 1.2 (391), *Contra epistola Manichaei quam fundamenti vocant* 10.11 (397); *Confessiones* 3.11.20, 4.1.1; 5.6.10 (397-401). However, on investigation the length of the sojourn is seen to be more like ten, or even eleven years. On this discrepancy see: P. Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin*, Paris: éditions E. de Boccard (1968), p. 78 and Leo C. Ferrari, "Augustine's 'Nine Years' as a Manichee," *Augustiniana* 25 (1975): 208-215.
3. For the occurrence of this verse in Ambrose's sermons of the relevant time-period, see James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions*, (3 vols.), Oxford: Clarendon (1992). See vol. 2, p. 325. Henceforth such a reference will be: O'Donnell 2.325.
4. Such unqualified numbers will refer to the *Confessions*. The Ryan translation is used for quotations, sometimes with small changes.
5. 2 Cor 3.6 is first found some four or five years after his baptism in *De utilitate credendi* 3.9 (391/2) and subsequently another four or five years elapse until two occurrences of it are found in 396 (*De doctrina christiana* 3.5.9; *De diversis questionibus ad Simplicianum*, 1.1.17). The work against Faustus does contain four references, but this was not written until 397/8. The *Confessions* of 397-401 contains two occurrences. This and similar cases of biblical reference analysis in the present study are based on a private computer file of biblical references in the relevant works of Augustine, as found in the Maurists' *Opera Omnia*, Paris: Gaume (1836-1839).
6. See Leo C. Ferrari, "Isaiah and the early Augustine," *Collectanea Augustiniana; Mélanges T. J. Van Bavel*, vol. 2, [*Augustiniana*, 41 (1991)] 739-756, especially 739-747.
7. The present topic of young Augustine's dual religious life of being both Catholic and Manichee undercuts the older and much discussed question of when he "re-turned" to the *Catholica*. For an example of this latter see G. Mathon, "Quand

faut-il placer le retour d'Augustin à la foi catholique?" *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* 1 (1955): 107-127.

8. Italics are added. The Latin is "[illa religio] quae pueris nobis insita est, et medullitus implicata" (C. *Academicos* 2.2.5). Cf. *Confessiones* 3.4.8.

9. "Manichaeos quidem relinguendos esse decrevi" (5.14.25).

10. Verbs of abandoning (*de/relinquere*, *deserere*, *destituer*) are found close to 60 times in the text, mostly with respect to God, but to my knowledge, never with respect to the Church. For such word-counts see R. H. Cooper *et al.*, *Concordantia in XIII libros Confessionum S. Aurelii Augustini*, Hildesheim, Zürich, New York: Olms-Weidmann (1991).

11. The various words for return, with their total occurrences in brackets are: *re-dire* (30), *reditus* (2) and *revertere* (4). There are 24 occurrences of returning to God, but none of returning to the Catholic Church.

12. *St. Augustine's Confessions; The Odyssey of Soul*, New York: Fordham University Press (1989) p. 54.

13. Italics are added. The Latin is: "Statui ergo tamdiu esse catechumenus in catholica ecclesia." At 2.328 O'Donnell says of Augustine (in part): "He was a catholic catechumen until 18, followed the Manichees enthusiastically for years after . . . On going to Milan he takes up orthodox Christianity again." Consequently, O'Donnell does not address the claims of Augustine presented here, to the effect that he *remained* a catechumen while he was a Manichee.

14. Cambridge: at the University Press, 1908, p. 135, n. 10. Hereafter, this work is referred to as: Gibbs and Montgomery. The problem is totally ignored by A. Solignac in his notes to the Bibliothèque Augustinienne edition of the *Confessions*. See volume 13, pp. 674-676.

15. New York: Image Books, 1960, p. 384, n. 2 of chapter 14.

16. Italics are added. The Latin is as follows: "Figam pedes in eo gradu, in quo puer a parentibus positus eram" (6.11.18).

17. *Op. cit.*, 1.2.

18. *Loc. cit.* Italics are added to the English extract.

19. Italics are added in the English. The Latin is: "Decreveram tamdiu esse catechumenus in Ecclesia cui traditus a parentibus eram, donec aut invenirem quod vellem, aut mihi persuaderem non esse quaerendum." (*Op. cit.*, 8.20). With its *tamdiu* and *esse*, this sentence is of the same kind as the first one above.

20. *Letter 36*, 14.32 (italics are added). See also: F. Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop; Church and Society at the Dawn of the Middle Ages* (trans. Brian Bettershaw and G. R. Lamb), New York: Harper & Row (1965), pp. 177-179. This work will henceforth be referred to as: Van der Meer.

21. A similar problem arose in regard to her way of honoring the saints' memorial shrines (6.2.2).

22. She not only made an offering each day, but even went to church twice daily (5.6.17). Furthermore, even Bishop Ambrose himself sang her praises (6.2.2).

23. Augustine was still an indifferent catechumen in February, 386 (See p. 74 in Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (hereafter: Brown), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967). His indifference was still with him during the affair of the basilica of Milan when Ambrose defied the mother of the Emperor (9.7.15-16 and Brown, pp. 81-82). The proof of this is that, addressing God, Augustine says of himself and his friends at that time: "Ourselves, still cold to the warmth of your Spirit" (9.7.15).
24. It is also instructive to observe that Augustine described himself at that time as "no longer a Manichean, although not a Catholic Christian" (6.1.1). This is incompatible with his previously quoted statement: "I determined to continue as a catechumen in the Catholic Church" (5.14.25), as also (and more explicitly) with the previous statement of 391/2 describing Augustine's condition as a Manichee: "what shall I say about myself, I who was already a Catholic Christian?" (*The Advantage of Believing* 1.2). It also raises the question of whether it was possible to be a catechumen, but not a Catholic Christian, which does not appear compatible with the view of F. Van der Meer, according to whom the catechumens were called Christians (*op cit.*, pp. 348 and 354). On the other hand his mother said confidently in the same context (6.1.1) that before she died she would see Augustine "a faithful Christian." This would be compatible with the situation that he was indeed a Christian, by virtue of being a catechumen, but an unfaithful Christian, because he had only recently terminated relations with the Manichees and was skeptical that the way to eternal life could be found (6.2.2).
25. Brown 16.
26. The work was quite obviously meant to be read before a live audience (10.3.3-10.4.6). Cf. S. Longosz, "Augustine's 'Theatricum Carmen'," *Studia Patristica* 22 (1989): 290-293.
27. To have raised the topic of Augustine's continuing status as a catechumen while he was also a Manichee would have greatly enfeebled the main thrust of the staged recital by becoming involved in a dramatically irrelevant detail.
28. See also Leo C Ferrari, "Saint Augustine's Conversion Scene; The End of a Modern Debate?" *Studia Patristica* 22 (1989) 235-250, especially 243-246.
29. See also Van der Meer, pp. 348 and 354.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 353-357. See also O'Donnell 2.67-68.
31. The repetition of the ritual was implied by the imperfect tense (*signabar . . . condiebar . . .*) as pointed out by Gibbs and Montgomery (p. 17, n. 16), and followed by Aimé Solignac, Introduction, p. 114 in *Oeuvres de saint Augustin*, (vol. 13), *Les Confessions* (livres I-VII), Paris: Desclée de Brouwer (1962). See also F. Van der Meer, pp. 353-357.
32. See Van der Meer, pp. 349-353. One is also reminded of the close friend of Augustine who was only baptized when grievously ill and unconscious (4.4.8) at about twenty years of age (4.4.7).
33. The only other occasion on which he applies the name to himself in the *Confessions* is in the ninth book (9.4.8).

34. Among others, this latter question is raised by Courcelle (*op. cit.* p. 63) and Jean Pierre de Menasce, O.P., on p. 91 in his article "Augustin Manichéen," *Freundesgabe für Ernst Robert Curtius* Bern: M. Rychner 1956, 79-93. See especially pp. 86 and 88-91.
35. Van der Meer, pp. 354-356.
36. For the persecution of the Manichees in Augustine's Africa see pp. 213-233 in François Decret, *L'Afrique Manichéenne (IVe-Ve siècles). Etude historique et doctrinale*, tome I, Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes (1978), hereafter: *L'Afrique Manichéenne*. For the case of Manicheism and imperial proscription in the Roman Empire see Erich-Hans Kaden, "Die Edikte gegen die Manichäer von Diokletian bis Justinian," *Festschrift für H. Lewald*, Basel: Helbing und Lichtenhahn (1953), 55-62. See also Prosper Alfarcic, *Les écritures Manichéennes* (vol. 1, the only volume to appear), Vue générale, Paris (1918), p. 95ff.
37. See F. Van der Meer, pp. 382-387.
38. Here Ryan, following Gibbs and Montgomery (p. 78, n. 4), in the notes to his translation, observes of the secret practice of Manicheism that it was necessitated by prohibitions of both church and state (p. 378, notes to book 4, chapter 1, note 3). See also O'Donnell *occulte* 2.204.
39. See Peter Schäfer, *Das Schuldbewusstsein in den Confessiones des heiligen Augustinus; Eine religionspsychologische Studie* (Abhandlungen zur Philosophie und Psychologie der Religion, 25), Würzburg: C. J. Becker Universitäts-Druckerei, 1930.
40. This claimed status of catechumen by Augustine when in Milan can be seen in the extract from his letter to Casulanus. See note 19. Also, Augustine was well aware of the fame and power of Ambrose before leaving Rome, for he says: "I came to Milan, and to Ambrose, its bishop, a man famed throughout the world as one of its very best men" (5.13.23). Doubtless Augustine's Manichean sponsors (*ibid.*) would have appraised him of the need for secrecy and the value for them of his public status as a catechumen.
41. Leo C. Ferrari, "The Background to Augustine's *City of God*," *The Classical Journal* (Milwaukee), 67 (1972): 198-208, especially 200-203.
42. J. J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine; The Growth of St. Augustine's Mind up to his Conversion*, New York: Alba House (1965 edn.), p. 63. See also Brown, pp. 394 and 395 and R. J. O'Connell S.J., *St. Augustine's Early Theory of Man, A.D. 386-391*, Cambridge (Mass.): Belknap (1968), p. 233. Hereafter this will be referred to as O'Connell's *Early Theory*.
43. P. 859 in William Frend, "Manichaeism in the struggle between Saint Augustine and Petilian of Constantine," *Augustinus Magister* (vol. 2), Paris (1954), 859-866. In general, Frend's article has many enlightening insights into the Catholic-Donatist-Manichee dynamics.
44. Italics are added. The Latin is: "Incidit in homines superbe delirantes" (3.6.10). Cf. *C. Academicos*, 1.1.3, where (addressing Romanianus) Augustine says of

Manicheism: "[illa superstitio] in quam te mecum praecipitam dederam." See also O'Donnell 2.175.

45. Pierre Jean de Menasce O.P., *art. cit.* pp. 8 and 88-91. De Menasce raises the question (on p. 91) as to why there is no mention by Augustine of the important role of Christ in Manichean spirituality. The previous observation in the text about the elimination of commonalities should answer this question. Also, on some relevant comparisons of Manicheism and Catholicism see W. J. Sparrow Smith, *St. Augustine's Conversion; An Outline of his Development to the Time of his Ordination*, London: S.P.C.K. (1930), 24-29.

46. *C. Faustum* 19.4 and 20.2-4.

47. See W. J. Sparrow Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

48. *C. Faustum* 6.1, 8.1, 9.1, 10.1 etc. See also De Menasce, *art. cit.*, pp. 85-86.

49. Brown, p. 43. Cf. *C. Faustum*, 15.1 and *L'Afrique Manichéenne* 270-273.

50. See *L'Afrique Manichéenne*, I, 270ff.

51. *C. Faustum* 14.1; 20.2. Cf. Brown, p. 52.

52. F. C. Burkitt, *The Religion of the Manichees* (Donnellan Lectures for 1924) Cambridge: at the University Press (1925), pp. 37-38. This particular detail may not have been known to Augustine.

53. It is found but twice in his *De moribus ecclesiae Catholicae* of 388-390, only once in the *De duabus animabus* (391/2), once in the *C. Fortunatum* (392) and twice in works of 393-5, before becoming more common from 396 onwards. On the other hand, Jesus the Truth does appear as the climax of the *De beata vita* of 386. See R. J. O'Connell's *Early Theory*, pp. 244-246.

54. Burkitt, *op. cit.*, 37-38.

55. One author attributes this opinion to the influence of the writings of Porphyry, but does not realize that this influence would have had to have over-ridden that of Augustine's former Manicheism which regarded Christ as a Divine Being. See Charles Boyer S.J., "Le retour à la foi de saint Augustin. Remarques sur une opinion de M. Pierre Courcelle," *Doctor communis*, 8 (1955): 1-6.

56. *C. Faustum* 6.1, 5.2; 3, 7.1, 11.1, 23.1-4, 27.1; 28.1. See also Burkitt, *op. cit.*, 37-38. On this point of course, Catholicism and Manicheism differed radically, with the former teaching the Incarnation of Christ. In this regard, the famous words of Jn 1.14: "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" occur all of three dozen times in Augustine's works up to and including 401. But in the earliest works only one reference occurs in 388/9 (*De Genesi contra Manichaeos* 2.24.37) and only one other in 389/391 (*De vera religione* 16.30). The *De diversis questionibus LXXXIII* does contain 4 references, but the work extends over the period 388 through 396. The location of the first reference in the text (69.1) and proportional calculations give the putative date of 394. Most of the remaining of the 3 dozen references occur from 396 onwards.

57. *A Manichaean Psalm-Book*, part II, vol. II in *The Manichaean Manuscripts in the Chester Beatty Collection*, edited by C. R. C. Allberry, Stuttgart (1938).

58. *The Advantage of Believing* (Luanne Meagher, trans.), 1.2. This work dates from 391/2.
59. It is possible that Monica's anger, when she would not let Augustine eat at the same table with her, while imputed by Augustine to his Manicheism, (3.11.19), could have also derived from the concubine and illegitimate son that Augustine acquired while studying in Carthage (4.2.2). See also Brown, p. 16.
60. William Frend, *art. cit.*, p. 865. Several impressive cases are cited on this page.
61. *Ibid.*
62. *Contra litteras Petiliani*, 3.16.19 and Brown, pp. 203-204, 386 and 393, as well as Frend, *art. cit.*
63. *C. Faustum*, 20.3 and Frend, *art. cit.*, p. 860.
64. The most common words are: *abditus*, *abscondere*, *occultus* and *secretus* and *latere*. See the Concordance of R. H. Cooper *et al.*
65. 1.4.4. Cf. 4.14.23; 5.6.10; 6.3.4; 6.12.22; 7.8.12; 8.11.25; 9.1.1; 9.10.23; 10.4.6.
66. See Paul Rigby, *Original Sin in Augustine's 'Confessions'*, Ottawa: Ottawa University Press 1987. Pp. 58-67 concern specifically the factor of the delay of baptism.
67. It must be appreciated that in that perspective, sins committed after baptism were possessed of an extraordinary gravity, for as Augustine says: "for indeed the guilt and defilement of sins committed after that cleansing would be greater and more dangerous" (1.11.17). See also Van der Meer, pp. 382-3.
68. Van der Meer, p. 350.
69. Van der Meer. pp. 308-311; 350-351.
70. See Brown, p. 52.
71. This is indicated by an allusion to the (Manichean) nation of darkness in the text, just before the extract cited here.
72. *Op. cit.*, 2.27.41. This extract is from the translation by Roland J. Teske S.J., entitled *Two Books on Genesis against the Manichees*, which is volume 84 in *The Fathers of the Church*, Washington D.C.: C. U. A. Press (1991).
73. *Expositio quarundam propositionum ex epistola ad Romanos* 39.
74. See O'Donnell 2.126-127.
75. The *mater iniquorum* of 13.14.15. The secrecy of the night also permitted another deed for which Augustine reproaches himself: he persuaded his mother to spend the night in an oratory near the sea, while he secretly sailed away to Rome: "ea nocte clanculo ego profectus sum" (5.8.15).