

THE 'FOOD OF TRUTH' IN AUGUSTINE'S CONFESSIONS

WHILE food (and drink) are indispensable ingredients in Rabelais' rollicking *Gargantua*, it would seem most incongruous to claim that the same applies to Augustine's *Confessions*. This latter work concerns primarily a spiritual quest which of its nature aims to eschew the whole realm of carnal appetite. However, the incongruity is resolved by examining the precise manner in which this spiritual quest is depicted. Once appreciated as the search of the starved soul for the divine Food of Truth, metaphorical allusions to food and drink become essential ingredients of the portrayal, as is demonstrated in the following pages.

On searching examination, the *Confessions* is found to be richly garnished with a variety of alimentary allusions. The glossarian can find in its pages no less than one hundred and fifty different words connected with the acts of eating and drinking. One of the commonest references is to food, which under its various names (*alimentum*, *cibus*, *esca*, *obsonium* and *pulmentum*) occurs no less than thirty-one times. Again, thirst, whether as a noun or verb (as *sitis* and *sitire* respectively), is mentioned no less than fourteen times. Both these examples are surpassed by the commoner verbs denoting eating (*edere*, *manducare* and *pasci* or *pascere*) which between them number at least forty different instances of usage. The previous examples are but a few of many such commonly occurring words in the Latin text of the book.

In view of the repeated emphasis on ingestion throughout the work, it is noteworthy that the complementary process of excretion is (at least to my knowledge) not mentioned once in the course of the entire book. However, by way of substitution, as it were, for this lack, it is interesting to note the presence of antiperistaltic phenomena such as ruminating and vomiting.¹

In addition to the straightforward use of nutritional terms in their primary, or univocal sense, Augustine is much inclined to employ them in what are often vivid metaphors. Such is the case in the following comparison of recollection to the gastric act of rumination:

¹ The metaphor of ruminating is found four times: *Confessions* (hereafter this title is omitted) 3.6.11; 6.3.; 10.14.22 and 11.2.3. Twice Augustine writes of vomiting up the errors of the Manichaeans: 7.2.3: & 9.4.9.

May one say then, that just as food is brought up from the stomach by chewing the cud (*ruminando*) so these things [which are stored in the memory] are brought up from the memory by recollection?²

More important to Augustine than such psychological metaphors are those which are of a spiritual nature. In the second book of the *Confessions* he writes of

That kind of drunkenness in which the world forgets you, its creator, and falls in love with your creature instead of with you; so drugged it is with the invisible wine of a perverse self-will, bent upon the lowest objects.³

Notwithstanding his pronounced penchant for metaphors, Augustine carefully eschews the most obvious of analogies in the domain of knowledge. This is the notion of the soul being nourished by what it drinks in through the senses. Indeed, on closer inspection Augustine is seen to take the very opposite view—due to the lust of the eyes (*concupiscentia oculorum*) the soul is all too easily distracted and dissipated on externals.⁴ Whether it be a mere lizard, or a spider, no matter how small the object, nevertheless the fault of distraction and of dissipation is great.⁵ Consequently the endless varieties of shapes and colours of visual experience represent merely just so many diverse disguises of a seductive queen- light:

The eyes love beautiful shapes of all kinds, glowing and delightful colors. These things must not take hold on my soul; that is for God to do . . . These things affect me during all the time every day that I am awake . . . For light is the queen of colors, and wherever I am in daytime she is suffused over everything visible; she glides up to me in shape after shape, cajoling me when I am doing some thing quite different and am paying no deliberate attention to her.⁶

The objects of sense experience may cry out to the believer that they did not make themselves, but were made by God,⁷ however, any notion of the soul being nourished by what it has drunk in through the senses is completely foreign to the Augustine of the *Confessions*. On the very contrary, he sees this interest in externals as vain curiosity which leads to spiritual impoverishment. He expresses his point with a striking metaphor of the type already indicated:

² 10.14.22.

³ 2.3.6.

⁴ 10.35.54.

⁵ 10.35.57.

⁶ 10.34.51.

⁷ 10.6.9.

Those who find their joys in things outside easily become vain and waste themselves on things seen and temporal and, with their minds starving, go licking at shadows.⁸

God is not to be sought out-of-doors, but inside in the soul.⁹ One important source of this distrust of the world displayed by sight would seem to have been Augustine's youthful sojourn among the heretical Manichaeans. He sees himself as having been taken in by that light-worshipping sect precisely because he had let the eye of the flesh feed upon externals:

I had fallen in with that bold woman in the allegory of Solomon who, knowing nothing, sits at her door and says: 'Eat ye bread of secrecies willingly, and drink ye stolen waters which are sweet' [*Proverbs* 9.13, 14 & 17]. She it was who seduced me, for she found my soul dwelling out of doors, in the eye of my flesh, and chewing over in myself the cud (*ruminantem*) of what I had eaten (*vorassem*) through that eye.¹⁰

This attitude towards the external world, particularly as revealed by sight, helps explain why the *Confessions* (in a compensatory manner) is so rich in gustatory and gastric metaphors. Since the quest for God is primarily internal, the language of sense experience best adapted to this inner search would be similarly orientated, whence the appeal of metaphors associated with eating, drinking, digestion and other such alimentary phenomena.

However, while this internal perspective would (at least in theory) dispose of temptations arising from the outer world, it would seem to have the disadvantage of leaving one all the more exposed to temptations from the inner sensations. In this regard, it is noteworthy that Augustine was concerned about the concupiscences of the belly (*concupiscentiae ventris*),¹¹ which he could not give up once and for always, like sex.¹² I will return to this matter later on.

It follows too from Augustine's introspective orientation that the terrain which held greater interest for him was not the visible external world, but rather "the fields and spacious palaces of memory"¹³ which receive so much attention in the tenth book of the *Confessions*.¹⁴ It is there that he begins his inner search for God. The knowledge which

⁸ 9.4.10.

⁹ 7.10.16.

¹⁰ 3.6.11.

¹¹ 10.31.44.

¹² 10.31.47.

¹³ 10.8.12.

¹⁴ 10.8.12.

guides him is not the spontaneous and direct knowledge of experience, but rather the deliberating reflective kind which is produced by ruminating upon the contents of the memory. For Augustine, the memory is as it were, the stomach of the mind.¹⁵ Again, the comparison is clarified by the analogy noted above:

May one say, then, that just as food is brought up from the stomach by chewing the cud (*ruminando*), so these things are brought up from the memory by recollection?¹⁶

This indeed is the method of procedure of the first nine autobiographical books, during which Augustine is engaged in the quest for the Food of Truth. Yet initially, he is far indeed from his goal. Only in the seventh book does he seem to hear the voice of God saying:

I am the food of grown men. Grow and you shall feed upon me. And you will not, as with the food of the body, change me into yourself, but you will be changed into me.¹⁷

Meanwhile, as the reader follows him through the account of his erring life in the earlier books, it is remarkable how often the more important events are clarified by alimentary metaphors. Even of his arrival into the world as a babe, he observes: "I was welcomed then with the comfort of woman's milk."¹⁸ Later in life, as a schoolboy, his studies included literature. In retrospect he condemns the use of immoral stories for teaching innocent children to read. This time another metaphor of drinking is used:

Not that I blame the words themselves; they are like choice and valuable vessels. What I blame is the wine of error which is put into them; and then our drunken teachers raise their glasses to us and, if we do not drink to them too, we get beaten for it, without any chance of appealing to any sober judge.¹⁹

At the age of seventeen he was sent away to complete his professional studies in literature and rhetoric at distant Carthage. He describes his arrival in that city with a most expressive culinary metaphor: "I came to Carthage and all around me in my ears were the sizzling and frying of unholy loves (*sartago flagitiosorum amorum*)."²⁰ There

¹⁵ 10.14.21-22.

¹⁶ 10.14.22.

¹⁷ 7.10.16.

¹⁸ 1.6.7.

¹⁹ 1.16.26.

²⁰ 3.1.1.

too, as would be expected, he fell headlong into the love for which he had longed. Yet this was not the real Food of Truth and he thanks God for having sprinkled it with bitter gall.²¹ thereby chastening his unruly appetite. Indeed, at this stage of his life he did not even know that he was starved for the real Food:

I was starved inside me for inner food (for you yourself, my God), yet this starvation did not make me hungry. I had no desire for the food that is incorruptible and this was not because I was filled with it; no, the emptier I was, the more my stomach turned against it.²²

What can be regarded as the first stage in Augustine's conversion²³ occurred when he was nineteen and happened upon a book called *Hortensius*. written by Cicero.²⁴ This contained an exhortation to philosophy and inflamed the idealistic young Augustine with a burning desire for wisdom. However, the one reservation he had about the book was that it lacked the name of Christ, which as he says "had been with my mother's milk drunk in devoutly by my tender heart, where it remained deeply treasured."²⁵

On the other hand, both the name of Christ and the promise of wisdom were advertised by the Manichaeon religion which worshipped the sun and moon as divine envoys from the Kingdom of Light. This religion seems to have elicited Augustine's interest soon after the *Hortensius* episode. At that time, while he panted for Truth deep down in the very marrow of his soul, the Manichaees pretended to serve it up to him in their learned treatises:

On these dishes there was set before me, in my hunger for you, the sun and the moon, beautiful creations of yours, but nevertheless creations of yours and not you yourself.²⁶

Being hungry for the Food of Truth, he feasted on these dishes. yet without being nourished. Indeed, they were as nourishing as food in dreams.²⁷ He likens his condition at that stage to that of the prodigal

²¹ *Ibid.* Cf. 1.14.23 & 2.2.4.

²² 3.1.1.

²³ This is the interpretation of Maria Peters, 'Augustins erste Bekehrung,' *Harnack-Ehrung* & c. (Leipzig 1921) 195-211.

²⁴ 3.4.7-8.

²⁵ 3.4.8.

²⁶ 3.6.10. Noteworthy is the fact that the word for dishes (*fercula*) was also the name of a festivity in honour of the goddesses Coelestis and Berecynthia which Augustine describes as lewd and obscene (*City of God*. 2.4.).

²⁷ 3.6.10.

son: "Far indeed was I straying from you, debarred even from the husks of swine whom I fed with husks."²⁸ At the opening of the fourth book of the *Confessions* Augustine berates himself for the nine years he spent as a member of the Manichaeian sect. Left to his own devices he sees himself as sure to fall away from God who alone is his true nourishment: "Or what am I, even at the best, except an infant sucking the milk you give and feeding upon you, the food that is imperishable."²⁹

Disillusionment with the counterfeit food of the Manichaeians was bound to grow upon the earnest Augustine. His religious difficulties became more insistent. He was advised by his co-religionists to await the coming to Carthage of the famous Manichaeian bishop named Faustus, who would doubtless be able to solve all his difficulties. Augustine was indeed initially impressed by the style and manner of this Faustus when he did arrive in Carthage. Yet as to the substance of what he had to offer, Augustine expresses his anticipatory discernment with yet another alimentary analogy: "I was interested not so much in the dish and adornment of a fine style as in the substance of the knowledge which this celebrated Faustus of theirs was setting before me."³⁰ His final verdict upon Faustus is expressed with picturesque succinctness: "My thirst could not be relieved by expensive drinking vessels and a well-dressed waiter."³¹

Disappointed in Faustus and disillusioned with Manichaeism, the ambitious Augustine sailed to Rome where he taught for a year. The recount of his adventures continues to be well garnished with a variety of alimentary metaphors. Thus, thanks to Manichaeian connections (which he had retained in spite of his declining faith in that sect) he obtained the position of public orator in the imperial city of Milan: "My application was supported by those very people who were intoxicated with the vanities of Manichaeism."³² In Milan he met the famous bishop Ambrose who was dispensing to his people God's spiritual food of wheat, oil and wine.³³ At that stage too, the Manichaeian Augustine did not appreciate what joys Ambrose was experiencing in the secret rumination of God's bread.³⁴ Surrounded constantly as he was, by his people, the devoted Ambrose could only be found alone by the inquiring Augustine when the bishop was either refreshing his body

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ 4.1.1.

³⁰ 5.3.3.

³¹ 5.6.10.

³² 5.13.23.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ 6.3.3.

with food or his mind with reading.³⁵ Yet Ambrose's sermons brought to Augustine new revelations, so that he did not abandon the new doctrine which he was discovering, "but rather drank more and more deeply of it every day."³⁶

In Milan too, Augustine was one day walking the streets with some friends when his attention was attracted by the sight of a drunken beggar, laughing and enjoying himself and wishing well to the passers-by.³⁷ Augustine found the spectacle depressing in the extreme. It made him realize how drunk he himself was with wordly ambition. The beggar would sleep off his drunkenness, whereas Augustine saw himself going to bed with his own form of intoxication and arising every morning no less intoxicated than before.³⁸ This experience seems to have moved Augustine very deeply; so much so that he began to realize that the wine of worldly ambition could not dullen him to his great hunger for the Food of Truth. Indeed, he begins at long last to desire that Food. Thus, he says of himself and his two friends, Alypius and Nebridius:

So there were together the mouths of three hungry people, sighing out their wants one to another, and 'waiting upon Thee that Thou mightest give them their meat (*escam*: food) in due season.'³⁹

This idea is repeated a few pages later, but with a significant change of emphasis from mere hunger to an anticipation of fulfillment:

You were preparing for us your own good things, being about 'to give us meat in due season,' and to open Thy hand, and to fill our souls with blessings.⁴⁰

The two chapters subsequent to this citation close the sixth book of the *Confessions*. The next book is to witness some important developments which pave the way for Augustine's conversion in the eighth book. Again, the alimentary metaphors employed by Augustine manifest a growing awareness that he is drawing near to the Food of Truth for which he has long searched. First, he regrets that he did not vomit up the false food of the Manichaeans years before.⁴¹ Later in the book,

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ 7.5.7.

³⁷ 6.6.9-10.

³⁸ 6.6.10.

³⁹ 6.10.17. The quote is from *Psalms* 145 15.

⁴⁰ 6.14.24.

⁴¹ 7.2.3.

he observes how the Israelites, having turned to the worship of idols, bowed down before the image of a calf that eats hay, but he refuses to be nourished by such idolatry.⁴² Next, he seems to hear the voice of God telling him that He, the Almighty, is the food of grown men, upon which Augustine will feed when he is spiritually mature.⁴³ However, despite his nearness to the Food which he has long sought, Augustine feels himself falling back into his old ways "carrying nothing with me except a loving memory . . . and a longing for something which may be described as a kind of food of which I had perceived the fragrance but which I was not yet able to eat."⁴⁴ As he was to discover, he was unable to enjoy God because he had not then embraced the Mediator, Jesus Christ, whose function is, as it were, to wean man to the divine Food: "mingling with our flesh that food which I lacked strength to take; for 'the Word was made flesh,' so that your wisdom, by which you created all things, might give its milk to our infancy."⁴⁵

The eighth book climaxes in Augustine's conversion during the famous garden-scene at Milan.⁴⁶ However, it is not until the ninth book, and in retrospect, that he describes himself as having, during an unforgettable experience, at last reached, even if momentarily, the region of the Food of Truth. The event occurred on the way back to Africa. After his baptism, Augustine, his mother and their friends had journeyed as far as Ostia, when Monica died.⁴⁷ After reminiscing on her virtues, Augustine's thoughts go back to a few days before her final illness was to come upon her. They were standing in a window overlooking the garden of the house in which they were staying at Ostia while resting up for their sea voyage. In their conversation with one another they were speculating on what the life of the saints would be like. Suddenly they felt themselves transported, passing beyond even the heavens themselves, as Augustine describes:

And still we went upward, meditating and speaking and looking with wonder at your works, and we came to our own souls, and we went beyond our souls to reach that region of never-failing plenty where 'Thou feedest Israel' forever with the Food of Truth and where life is that Wisdom by whom all these things are made.⁴⁸

⁴² 7.9.15.

⁴³ 7.10.16.

⁴⁴ 7.17.23.

⁴⁵ 7.18.24. Cf. 13.18.23 & 13.22.32. Also in Paul: *I Thessalonians* 2.7; *I Corinthians* 3.2, and also found in *Hebrews* 5.12.

⁴⁶ 8.12.

⁴⁷ 9.8.17.

⁴⁸ 9.10.

This extract constitutes the climax to the much-discussed episode which has come to be known among Augustinian scholars as the Vision at Ostia.⁴⁹ During this experience, (whatever its nature), Augustine feels that he had tasted, however briefly, the "Food of Truth" for which he had so long been searching in the prior pages of the *Confessions*, "We two had, as it were, gone beyond ourselves and in a flash of thought had made contact with that eternal Wisdom which abides above all things."⁵⁰ It would seem that by that experience, however brief, his entire life thereafter had been changed: "[Would that] life might be forever like that moment of understanding which we had had."⁵¹

It is noteworthy that the description is introduced with mother and son yearning after the fountain of life:

Yet with the mouth of our heart we panted for the heavenly streams of your fountain, the fountain of life, which is with you, so that, if some drops from that fountain—all that we could take—were to be scattered over us, we might in some way or other be able to think of such high matters.⁵²

The impact of this metaphor of the fountain (*fons*) is trebly apt to be wasted upon the modern reader. With the common-place convenience of plumbing today, it is a matter of discounting the first images which come to mind, such as drinking fountains, as well as fountains of the decorative garden variety. Rather does Augustine by the word *fons* seem to intend consistently a naturally occurring spring from which water wells up out of the bowels of the earth. This is the common biblical meaning of the word and the way in which Augustine employs it in the *Confessions*.⁵³

Secondly (and again because of the seemingly universal benefits of present-day plumbing), it becomes difficult for the modern reader to imagine a way of life devoid of the ubiquitous water-tap and its apparently endless supply of the vital fluid. In sections of the Holy Land

⁴⁹ See Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin* (Paris 1968) 222-226.

⁵⁰ 9.10.25.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² 9.10.23.

⁵³ Thus in 6.1.1: "*ad fontem salientis aquae*: the fountain of water which springeth up (into life everlasting)" (John 4.14). Cf. 9.10.23: "Your fountain 'the fountain of life,' which is 'with you,'" (Psalm 36.9). *Fons*, the word for a fountain, spring or well occurs close to one hundred times in the Bible. In the *Confessions*, *fons* signifies God as the source of eternal life. Sources of this interpretation in the Bible include: *Proverbs* 14.27, *Ecclesiasticus* 1.5, *Jeremias* 2.13 and *Joel* 3.18.

of biblical times, as well as in parts of Augustine's Africa, the solitary spring (or well) was often the very source of life itself for people and animals for miles around.⁵⁴

Still a third factor necessary for appreciation of the metaphor of the spring is first-hand experience of the ardours imposed by a continuously hot and dry climate of the type in which Augustine spent most of his life.⁵⁵

Once these impediments to understanding are appreciated, it becomes possible to begin to realize why the metaphor of the fountain is so important to Augustine. On no less than a dozen occasions in the *Confessions* he refers to God as the fountain (*fons*), fountain of mercies (*fons misericordiarum*) or fountain of life (*fons vitae*).⁵⁶ He sees God as the very precious source of life itself, like the solitary spring on an arid terrain. To become separated from this vital source means a parched and agonizing death. Seemingly with vivid realization of this, Augustine exclaims in the twelfth book:

And now, look, I return thirsty and panting to your fountain. Let no one hold me back! I shall drink of it, and I shall live of it. Let me not be my own life! I lived evilly of myself; I have been death to myself; I come back to life in you.⁵⁷

Next, regarding the distribution of the fountain metaphor through the *Confessions* as a whole, an interesting change of emphasis is found to apply. Prior to the conversion-scene, the soul's longing for God seems to be expressed pretty well indifferently in terms either of hunger or of thirst. However from the ninth book onwards, the metaphor of the soul's thirsting after God acquires an almost exclusive dominance.⁵⁸ A reason for this emphasis is suggested in a passage about the soul of Augustine's friend, Nebridius, whose death occurred soon after Augustine's departure from Milan for Africa. Of the soul of Nebridius, Augustine writes:

⁵⁴ Thus Holofernes the Assyrian defeated the Israelites by putting guards over their wells. (*Judith* 7.7).

⁵⁵ Thagaste, Carthage and Hippo Regius, where Augustine spent most of his life lay in the same low altitude steppe region, which is presently classified as continuously hot with little precipitation (*Encyclopaedia Britannica; World Atlas*, (1957), plate 25).

⁵⁶ For these metaphors: 3.8.16; 4.4.7; 6.1.1 (twice); 8.2.3; 9.3.6; 9.10.23 (twice); 9.12.29 (here however Augustine is referring to the fountain of his own tears); 12.10.10; 13.4.5; 13.17.21 and 13.21.30.

⁵⁷ 12.10.10.

⁵⁸ Metaphors of hungering are found in: 10.6.8 and 10.27.38; while of thirsting in: 9.10.23; 10.27.38; 11.2.3; 12.10.10; 12.11.13; 13.13.14 and 13.17.21.

He lives in a place about which he used often to ask questions of me, an ignorant weak man. Now he no longer turns his ear to my lips; he turns his own spiritual lips to your fountain and drinks his fill of all the wisdom that he can desire, happy without end.⁵⁹

This implies that imbibing alone is seen as sufficing for the full life of the soul after death. However, in this present life, the spiritual food proper to the wayfarer would be conceived of as solid nourishment. Such a distinction is indeed found to be made by Augustine in another work. In the *Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount* (written about three years prior to the *Confessions*) Augustine is commenting on the significance of the words: "Give us this day our daily bread" from the Lord's Prayer. He proposes the following explanation which is most relevant to the present question:

It is called bread, not drink, because bread is converted into aliment by breaking and masticating it, just as the Scriptures feed the soul by being opened and made the subject of discourse; but drink, when prepared, passes as it is into the body: so that at present the truth is bread, when it is called daily bread; but then it will be drink, when there will be no need of the labour of discussing and discoursing, as it were of breaking and masticating, but merely of drinking unmingled and transparent truth.⁶⁰

The previous pages have been concerned with showing the importance of alimentary metaphors to Augustine's recount of his sinful life and his final conversion. Physical nourishment has constantly been the basis for appreciation of its spiritual counterpart. Fittingly, in the last lengthy section of the *Confessions* where he deals with food, Augustine comes to grips with some of the more important relations between the two kinds of nourishment.⁶¹ Basically, he sees the hallmark of the true Christian as being one whose God is not his belly. Those whose God is so situated cannot understand the spiritual dimension of nourishment which makes the manner of giving more important than the nourishment given. Thus, even a cup of cold water given in God's name will not go unrewarded. Finally, as Augustine points out, there is the entire realm of spiritual nourishment which cannot begin to be appreciated by those devoid of faith. Lacking appreciation of

⁵⁹ 9.3.6. Cf. a little previously: "you have placed him in that mountain rich in milk (*in monte incaseato*), your own mountain, the mountain of abundance (*monte uberi*), (9.3.5.).

⁶⁰ *Op. cit.* 2.10.37.

⁶¹ 13.26-27. Cf. *Romans* 14.17 and 16.18; *Philippians* 3.19; 4.15-17.

things spiritual, such people cannot understand how it can be said that the virtuous are nourished by adversities, as Saint Paul was.

Finally, it is noteworthy that Augustine's last mention of nourishment in the *Confessions* has an almost deliberately terminative character to it. All his alimentary metaphors in the course of the book have striven to communicate to the reader, the vastly superior nature of heavenly nourishment to that of the present condition. One who has been blessed in having tasted even the smallest drop of that nourishment knows full well where is the source of his true food: "And I heard you, Lord my God, and I sucked a drop of sweetness from your truth and I understood."⁶²

The garnishing of the *Confessions* with so many alimentary analogies (of which only the more prominent have been considered) has been dealt with in the preceding pages. It would seem to be an effective means of engaging the reader's interest in what is essentially a spiritual drama. One can therefore say that it provides sustenance to a literary venture into the tenuous realms of the spirit. This underscores yet another reason for the enduring appeal of Augustine's great masterpiece on the soul's pilgrimage to God.

However, there is also a totally different dimension to the phenomenon of the alimentary analogies in the *Confessions*. Augustine's gustatory metaphors seem to have a much deeper source than literary technique, however clever. One indication of this is to be found in the tenth book where the concupiscence of the flesh comes under extended consideration. The first and obvious manifestation of this concupiscence is in regard to sex. From this, God had but to command him to abstain and by His grace it was done: "Since you gave me the power, it was done, even before I became a dispenser of your Sacrament."⁶³ At the time of writing the *Confessions*, sex only troubles him in his dreams. On the other hand, it is far otherwise for him in regard to food and drink:

Placed as I am among these temptations, I strive every day against concupiscence in eating and drinking; for this is not the sort of thing that I can decide to give up once and for all and never touch again. as I was able to do with sex.⁶⁴

Food is a daily necessity and "while I pass from the discomfort of hunger to the satisfaction of sufficiency, in that very moment of transition there is set for me a snare of concupiscence."⁶⁵ The basic trouble

⁶² 13.30.45.

⁶³ 10.30.41.

⁶⁴ 10.31.47.

⁶⁵ 10.31.44.

is that "what is enough for health is not enough for pleasure."⁶⁶ Since eating is a daily necessity, Augustine sees himself as struggling every day against concupiscence in this regard: "[It is an] evil of the day . . . by fasting I carry on war every day . . . every day I try to resist these temptations . . . I strive every day against concupiscence in eating and drinking."⁶⁷ Four times in this brief extract, Augustine underlines the daily nature of that fierce warfare which he is waging relentlessly against gluttony, even as he pens the pages of the *Confessions*. He is therefore painfully aware of the insistent appeal of gustatory metaphors in it.

These details add a new element on interpretation to the subject of concupiscence in the *Confessions*. Overtly, in this regard Augustine's great struggle is against sexual concupiscence. This conflict reaches its climax in the eighth book.⁶⁸ In the first chapter Augustine confesses his inability to live without a woman.⁶⁹ Later in the same book, when introducing the events which immediately led up to his conversion he states: "I shall tell and confess to your name how it was that you freed me from the bondage of my desire for sex, in which I was so closely fettered."⁷⁰ After the conversion, in opening the ninth book he says: "Thou has broken my bonds in sunder."⁷¹ and later on in the same chapter, he describes how he was free at last from the need of "wallowing in filth and scratching the itching scab of lust."⁷² The drama of Augustine's conversion is all too obviously concerned primarily with liberation from the desire for sex. Lusting after food and drink hardly seems to be even a minor ingredient in that combat. Indeed, were it not for the above-mentioned confessions in the tenth book, one could conclude that temperance in food and drink was an easy and even pleasant virtue of the author of the *Confessions*. The question therefore arises as to the cause of Augustine's silence in the earlier pages of the book about his daily warfare against that intemperance.

This puzzle would seem to be solved by adverting to the details of the conversion-scene in the eighth book. Augustine had flung himself down in tears under the fig tree when he heard what seemed like a child's chanting, telling him to take up and read . . . He interpreted this as a divine command to take up the book of Paul which he had previously been reading and to see what his eyes first lighted upon in the

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ 10.31 *passim*.

⁶⁸ 8.11-12.

⁶⁹ 8.1.2.

⁷⁰ 8.6.13.

⁷¹ 9.1.1.

⁷² *Ibid.*

text. The passage which he first came upon certainly alluded to sexual concupiscence, against which he had manifestly been struggling. At the same time however, it is significant to realise that the very first words which he read in the celebrated passage from Paul, concerned not sex, but alimentary intemperance:

*Not in continuous banqueting and drunkenness (non in comessationibus et ebrietatibus), not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying: but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in concupiscence.*⁷³

As Buchheit's fine study has demonstrated, the conversion-scene marks Augustine's liberation from the chains of sexual concupiscence.⁷⁴ However, it was only later that Augustine came to realise that he was not also thereby liberated from lusting after food and drink. Therefore the very first words of the above passage from Paul came to be of enduring relevance to Augustine in his daily struggles against intemperance in regard to food and drink. Indeed, as noted above, the very ferocity of those struggles evoked the anguished confessions in the tenth book.

Therefore, it would seem to remain that Augustine's silence elsewhere in the *Confessions* about these daily struggles against alimentary intemperance can be explained by distinguishing between the two Augustines—the Augustine who was to be converted, and Augustine, the author of the *Confessions*. As explained, his conversion depended upon the conquest of sexual lust. This, with the help of God's grace, he achieved once and for always. However, by the time that he came to writing the story of his conversion, he had become painfully aware of another form of lust which was to be his daily adversary and which (unlike sex) he could not give up once and for all. This was concupiscence for food (and drink), yet only by triumphing over it could he be found worthy to taste of the divine Food of Truth.

Leo Charles Ferrari
St. Thomas University &
The University of New Brunswick
Fredericton, N.B., Canada

⁷³ 8.12.29. The text of Paul is from *Romans* 13.13. I have taken the liberty of substituting "continuous banqueting" for the Revised Standard Version word: "revelling." This seems quite justified. The Latin word in Augustine's text is "comessatio," of which Cornelius A. Lapide remarks: "comessationes sunt convivium, quae non honestatis, sed gulae causae fiunt." (*Commentarii in Scripturam Sacram*, Lugduni/Parisiis, MDCCCLXIV, tomus ix, p. 188).

⁷⁴ Vinzenz Buchheit, 'Augustinus unter dem Feigenbaum (zu Conf. VIII)', *Vigiliae Christianae* 22 (1969) 257-271.