

PAUL AT THE CONVERSION OF AUGUSTINE

(*Conf.* VIII, 12, 29-30)

As Augustine enters upon the final stages of the description of his conversion in the *Confessions*, the writings of Paul acquire even more than their customary importance. This is evident from two viewpoints. For one thing, there is a deliberate and insistent use of certain key texts from Paul.¹ For another, the writings of Paul come to be featured in the narrative itself and indeed in episodes of the utmost importance to the final stages of Augustine's conversion.

The first of these episodes follows upon the time when Augustine was liberated from his former materialism by reading certain books of the "Platonists". Next, he tells how he seized "most eagerly" upon the Holy Scriptures, but "more especially the Apostle Paul" (*Conf.* VII, 21, 27).² Subsequently, the same writings of Paul make two interventions of capital importance to the completion of Augustine's conversion. The first is the visit of a certain Pontitianus and his chance discovery of a volume of Paul lying on a table (*Conf.* VIII, 6, 14). Among other things, this evokes from the same Pontitianus a conversion-story which has a profound effect upon Augustine, leading him into the violent self-reproaches (*Conf.* VIII, 7, 16 to 8, 20) which culminate in his own conversion. Finally, there is the now-famous garden-scene and the conversion resulting from the reading from Paul in response to what seems to Augustine to be a heavenly command (*Conf.* VIII, 12, 29). As if to underline yet again the importance of Paul on that occasion, the conversion of Augustine's friend Alypius is also attributed there to his reading from the same volume of Paul (*Conf.* VIII, 12, 30).

It is that garden-scene, together with what transpired there, which has become the subject of so much dispute among Augustinian scholars. The subject of the dispute is not merely the detail that Augustine was finally converted by reading from Paul's writings. The crux of the mat-

¹ See 'collationnement des citations de Saint Paul' in Marc Lods, "La personne du Christ dans la 'conversion' de saint Augustin", *Recherches Augustiniennes* 11 (1976), 3-34.

² English texts of the *Confessions* are from the Pilkington translation in the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Series*, while the Latin is from the *Bibliothèque Augustinienne* edition. Unless otherwise indicated, all other Latin quotes are from the Gaume edition of the *Opera Omnia* (Paris, 1836-38).

ter is Augustine's claim that it was the chanting of a mysterious voice which directed him to undertake the reading. From the words chanted: "take up, read" (*tolle lege*), he concluded that he was divinely ordered (*divinitus . . . iuberi*) to open the volume of the Apostle which lay nearby and to read the very first words which his eyes beheld.³ This claim, namely to have been directed by some mysterious voice, is the *corpus* of the now-famous "*tolle lege* quarrel".⁴

Across the years, this dispute has attracted so many participants that it would be too great a task even to attempt to adequately summarise it here. Indeed, in the face of so much attention, there is an understandable inclination to follow the advice of a distinguished scholar and regard the *tolle lege* scene as merely *un petit épisode, presque sans importance*.⁵ Against this however, there are two obvious objections. The first is that our contemporary culture prevents us from adopting such an attitude of indifference towards anyone who claims to have been guided by "a voice". In this regard, the fact that Augustine belonged to another age and another culture would constitute mere mitigating circumstances, at best. In the second place, such minimising of the importance of the *tolle lege* scene all too obviously contradicts the whole drama of the *Confessions* in which that particular scene is manifestly the grand climax and the focus of all that has preceded it. As such, it is anything but insignificant. Therefore, like it or not, the realism of the *tolle lege* scene remains an important issue.

Speaking in very general terms, the issue has produced two opposed factions whose most prominent attitudes will be noted hereunder. In the interests of simplicity and by suppressing secondary characteristics, these two factions will be referred to as the "historicists" and the "fictionalists".

The historicists maintain that the *tolle lege* scene is an historic fact;

³ *Conf.* VIII, 12, 29. Cf. *Conf.* IV, 3, 5 where Augustine cites the example of a person opening at random a book of poetry and coming upon a verse which happened to be in marvellous accord with some problem of the moment. Augustine has been shown to be very much opposed to using the Scriptures for such purposes. See P. Courcelle, "Source chrétienne et allusions païennes de l'épisode du 'Tolle lege'", *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses* 32 (1952), 171-200, especially pp. 191-192.

⁴ Cf. H.-I. Marrou, "La querelle autour du 'Tolle lege'", *Revue d'Histoire ecclésiastique* 53 (1958), 45-57. This article is principally concerned with refuting Courcelle's arguments to the effect that the conversion-scene is basically fictional in character, with detectable sources of inspiration from the literature, both sacred and profane. Both the conversion in general and the *tolle lege* scene in particular, together with various opinions on them are treated in Franco Bolgiani's *La conversione di S. Agostino e l'VIII° libro delle 'Confessioni'*, Turin, 1956. See especially pp. 15-52 and 110-126 respectively.

⁵ Marrou, *art. cit.*, p. 57.

an accurate account of an event which really transpired, exactly as described.⁶ One of the most recent proponents of this viewpoint is W. Schmidt-Dengler who bases his decision upon his impressive analysis of the rhetorical artistry of the eighth book of the *Confessions*.⁷ Briefly summarised, his argument is based upon the presence of convincing concrete details in the *tolle lege* scene, as well as the almost complete absence of rhetorical devices (in sharp contrast to the preceding pages of the eighth book). Both the above aspects of the *tolle lege* scene convince Schmidt-Dengler of its historical realism.

However, the above conclusion would seem to be based upon an impossible assumption, namely that the author of the *tolle lege* scene were an artless orator devoid of any inventive imagination. Only then could the reader be assured that the events described had, as it were, inscribed themselves upon the paper without the slightest alteration by any artful intermediary. On the contrary however, in the case of the *tolle lege* scene it can be argued that the author has proven himself supremely resourceful as an artist. Thus, as Schmidt-Dengler himself has so well shown, the preceding pages are strongly structured according to well-known rhetorical devices. However, beginning with *Conf.* VIII, 12, 28 there is a purposeful loosening of style and structure.⁸ Then (among other things) in the beginning of *Conf.* VIII, 12, 29 there is the first use of the historical present in the book, with the very words which introduce the *tolle lege* episode: "ecce audio uocem de uicina domo."⁹ The manner of treatment of that scene is best described in Schmidt-Dengler's own words:

Von da ab setzt sich die Schilderung in einer wesentlich gemäßigteren Tonart fort. Die syntaktischen Grenzen werden immer präziser, und was noch zu erzählen ist, wird in möglichst einfacher Form dargebracht. Die Bedeutung der Stelle wird durch Anwendung des historischen Präsens gehoben. Rhetorische Figuren werden kaum herangezogen.¹⁰

Thus, in contrast to the preceding pages of rhetorical artifice, the sheer artlessness of the *tolle lege* scene is regarded as evidence of its

⁶ This is the argument of Bolgiani's book (footnote 4 above). Other like-minded authors in the recent literature are F. Cayré (1951) and P. Karl Gross (1954). Further, it is noteworthy that Robert Joly has twice claimed (1957 and 1966) that the *tolle lege* command is from an angel.

⁷ Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, "Der rhetorische Aufbau des achten Buches der *Konfessionen* des heiligen Augustin", *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* 15 (1969), 195-208.

⁸ *Art. cit.*, p. 203.

⁹ *Art. cit.*, p. 204.

¹⁰ *Art. cit.*, p. 205.

historical realism. But why could not the same contrast be seen as evidence of the extreme artfulness of the author of the eighth book of the *Confessions*? In contrast to the preceding pages of rhetorical artifice, the more "natural" style of the *tolle lege* scene provides added evidence of its "realism". A lively imagination for detail would add the finishing touches. Consequently, by arguing in such a manner, on the basis of the same evidence presented by Schmidt-Dengler, a fictional account of the *tolle lege* scene is also a distinct possibility.

In contrast to the historicists, the fictionalists claim that the *tolle lege* scene is wholly or partly fictional in character. Chief of these protagonists is of course the eminent Pierre Courcelle whose opinions, despite the immense learning behind them, have not always been kindly received.¹¹ From what he sees as demonstrable literary sources of certain events which the conversion-scene contains, Courcelle deduces that that scene is largely fictional in character.¹² The scene therefore has no necessary correspondence with reality. Accordingly, when writing of the *tolle lege* episode, Courcelle observes:

Malgré la part de fiction littéraire et de symbolisme qui est sensible dans la présentation de cette scène, Augustin ne cache pas que la décision de conversion est due moins au hasard d'un cri entendu d'un verset lu, qu'aux longs débats intérieurs qui l'ont précédée.¹³

Understandably, such an attitude to the events described in the *Confessions* is abhorrent to those of a more traditional outlook. If Augustine has added, omitted or otherwise changed any incidents in his conversion-

¹¹ For Courcelle's more recent appraisal of the *tolle lege* scene, see pp. 188-202 in his *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin*, Paris, 1968. Among others, the historicity of the *tolle lege* scene has recently been denied by Jean Barraud (1952) and J.-G. Préaux (1955, 1957). On the literature devoted to the conversion-scene controversy see Solignac's concise bibliography and valuable notes (pp. 546-549) in *Les Confessions*, Livres VIII-XIII, in volume 14 of the *Oeuvres de saint Augustin*. Much of the *tolle lege* quarrel seems to have grown out of Courcelle's articles beginning in 1951. The controversy seems also to have acquired added interest from the celebration (in 1954) of the sixteenth centenary of Augustine's birth. But differences of opinion about the conversion-scene of the *Confessions* did by no means date from that occasion. Almost a quarter of a century earlier, the year 1930 also witnessed the commemoration of the fifteenth centenary of Augustine's death. It is instructive to observe that among the articles of the occasion is to be found U. Mannucci's "La conversione di S. Agostino e la critica recente" in *Miscellanea Agostina* (Roma, 1930-31), vol. II, pp. 23-47. Mannucci gives an extensive survey and criticism of the preceding opinions about the conversion-scene and himself argues passionately for "l'opinione tradizionale".

¹² Whence Courcelle's *mode de présentation romanesque*. See especially, the *Recherches*, pp. 200-201.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 201.

story, then the ominous question arises as to just where this tampering with the original facts would end. It therefore becomes unthinkable to allow fact to be contaminated in any way by fiction. Consequently, every event in the story of the *Confessions* must have taken place exactly as described. The *tolle lege* scene must therefore be regarded as historical fact and therefore a faithful recount of the events exactly as they transpired.

Against this, the fictionalists can be represented as arguing that such an interpretation loses sight of the true nature of the *Confessions*. The work is not a mere diary of daily events in the author's life, but rather a work of literary art whose prime *raison d'être* is the religious edification of the reader.¹⁴ In such a perspective, while there can be no doubting the essential elements of the conversion-story, the author must be permitted to tell the story in his own way and in accord with the exigencies of his main purpose. Consequently, a certain romanticising of reality is inevitable. In the case of Augustine's *Confessions*, the actual facts would have been treated in a manner which has been explained (but rejected) by A. Solignac: "Il reste possible cependant qu'Augustin ait *habillé* les événements pour donner au récit une plus haute tenue littéraire."¹⁵ And this, it is maintained by the fictionalists, is precisely what has been done in the case of the *tolle lege* incident.

This particular episode has been so carefully scrutinised in the course of the present century, by both the historicists and the fictionalists that it would seem a waste of time to try to uncover anything new, at least in Augustine's description of the event. It is therefore with considerable hesitation that I would suggest that some important aspect of the *tolle lege* scene might perhaps have been overlooked during the above extensive investigations. However, it would seem that scholars have been so preoccupied with the dispute about the *tolle lege* command itself that they have neglected to read on and consider the significance of the object about which the command is concerned. I am referring of course to the volume of Paul which Augustine was commanded to take up, to open and to read.¹⁶

As was pointed out in the beginning of this article, Augustine's description in the *Confessions* of the final stages of his conversion contains a twofold tribute to the importance of Paul's writings in that process. In the first place, there is the purposeful presence of Pauline texts in the final stages of that description. Secondly, there is the testimony

¹⁴ Cf. *Conf.* X, 3, 3-4.

¹⁵ A. Solignac, *loc. cit.* (footnote 11), p. 549.

¹⁶ *Conf.* VIII, 12, 29. Cf. John J. O'Meara's "Arripui, aperui, legi", *Augustinus Magister*, I (1954), pp. 59-65, where O'Meara strongly defends the original reality of the *tolle lege* scene against Courcelle's fictional interpretation.

of the narrative itself in which the most important events feature the writings of Paul, as has been observed. Consistently with this viewpoint therefore, the climax of that narrative is not, as has been assumed, the *tolle lege* command (a means to the end), but rather the opening of the volume of Paul and the reading of the fateful passage which forever banished the gloom of doubt: "statim quippe cum fine huiusce sententiae quasi luce securitatis infusa cordi meo omnes dubitationis tenebrae dif-fugerunt" (*Conf.* VIII, 12, 29).

When the events leading up to Augustine's conversion are presented as above, attention focuses immediately upon the nature of that passage which Augustine read from Paul's writings. What exactly did it say? Furthermore, seeing that it forever changed Augustine's life, one can confidently expect to see that particular passage of Paul repeatedly venerated in Augustine's subsequent writings. Finally, the massive evidence of such allusions, when once assembled, would offer irrefutable proof of the real occurrence of the *tolle lege* scene. This would consolidate the claims of the historicists and also *ipso facto* undermine the arguments of the fictionalists. The purpose of this paper is therefore to consider the nature of the Pauline passage which so much changed Augustine's life, then to collect allusions to that passage in Augustine's subsequent writings.

Returning then to the *tolle lege* scene, Augustine takes up the volume of Paul in obedience to the mysterious chanting and opens it at random. The passage which he comes upon is that of *Romans* xiii, 13-14: "Not in revelling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." The ecstatic effect of these verses upon Augustine is succinctly underlined by the description in the *Confessions*:

No further would I read, nor did I need; for instantly, as the sentence ended,—by a light, as it were, of security infused into my heart,—all the gloom of doubt vanished away. (*Conf.* VIII, 12, 29).

Since it was *Romans* xiii, 13-14 which effected that miraculous transformation which endured for the rest of Augustine's life, it should be a comparatively easy task to find ample evidence of his predilection for those verses in his subsequent writings. More particularly, his earlier and more enthusiastic writings which intervened between his conversion and the description of it in the *Confessions* should be particularly rich in exultant allusions to *Romans* xiii, 13-14. This therefore defines the most promising time-period for the proposed search.

Before proceeding with this investigation, it is necessary to anticipate an objection raised in a more general manner by Solignac. Writing of

his reluctance to accept Courcelle's fictionalist interpretation of the conversion-scene in general, Solignac observes:

Nos doutes ne seraient levés de façon définitive que si les premiers écrits nous fournissaient un récit aussi complet que celui des *Confessions*; mais, en raison de la personnalité des destinataires et du but de ces ouvrages, Augustin n'avait pas à faire part d'un fait qui le touchait aussi intimement; ce fait par contre ne pouvait être omis dans les *Confessions*. On ne peut par suite tirer aucun argument du silence des premiers écrits. (*Op. cit.*, p. 549).

It is evident that the present investigation will be far more refined in technique than merely searching for allusions to the conversion-scene in Augustine's earlier works. As Solignac has well observed, such allusions, or even adumbrations, would all too easily be quite incongruous in the earlier works that have come down to us. It would be quite otherwise with Augustine's fondness for citing Scripture and particularly Paul. Such quotations soon become most frequent in Augustine's earlier works. The present inquiry will rely upon that established habit as well as upon his immense memory. Also important in regard to the obviously intense emotional experience of the conversion-scene will be Augustine's pre-eminently passionate character and his genius for seizing upon associations, however elusive. The present inquiry will also be thorough in that it will be sifting through Augustine's earlier works for the highly significant verses: *Romans* xiii, 13-14. It will also be sensitive in that it will analyse the context of such citations, when located, with a view to demonstrating overt or covert associations on Augustine's part with the powerful conversion-scene in general and with the *tolle lege* episode in particular.

As far as quotations from Paul are concerned, the field of inquiry is most promising. Augustine's earliest writings abound in such quotations. Confining our attention to *Romans*, I have estimated that the earliest writings, up to and including the *Confessions* contain about eight hundred and fifty quotations from this epistle alone.¹⁷ This is surely most encouraging for present purposes. By far the most popular source of quotations is *Romans* viii, with a total of almost one hundred and seventy verse-quotes. Next comes *Romans* i with just over one hundred and ten quotations. Ranking in third place are *Romans* v and *Romans* xiv, with verses quoted about eighty times from each chapter. However, in regard to the latter, about ninety per cent of the total is due to three

¹⁷ This total is from a count of the footnotes in the respective works in the Gaume edition of the *Opera Omnia* (Paris, 1836-38). Every single verse is counted, every time it occurs in a quotation.

lengthy extracts cited in certain anti-Manichean works, as will be seen later on in this study.¹⁸

Coming to the chapter of present interest, namely *Romans* xiii, by far the most popular verse (being quoted some fourteen times) is *Romans* xiii, 10: "Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." Next most frequently used (about half a dozen times) is *Romans* xiii, 1, with its command to be subject to the civil authorities. Within the above general context, the next question is the presence of *Romans* xiii, 13-14 in Augustine's writings prior to the *Confessions*.

On this matter Augustine is found to be astonishingly silent on even the most provocative of occasions. There are no rapturous exegeses of *Romans* xiii, 13-14 to be found in the writings of the above time interval. Indeed, as far as I have been able to ascertain, there is scarcely one reference to those verses in his works of that period. This is strange when one considers the general atmosphere of enthusiasm which permeates those writings.¹⁹ It is even stranger when one takes account of some of the particular works involved. For example, there is the *De vera religione* of 390 which was written with a view to converting his friend Romanianus who had followed Augustine into the Manichean heresy. Notwithstanding the similarities of both cases, as well as the well-known closeness between the two friends, there is no mention of the importance of the above verses from Paul. On the other hand, *Romans* xiii, 12-14 is quoted in the *De doctrina christiana* of 396, in which it is cited for an example in optional translation. However, it belongs to that portion of the work which was not written until the year 426.²⁰

Perhaps more revealing than any of the previous examples is the case of the *Expositio quarundam propositionum ex Epistola ad Romanos* of 394. Here, one would think, is an instance where Augustine cannot avoid expatiating upon *Romans* xiii, 13-14. Such an expectation is not entirely doomed to disappointment. Augustine comments very briefly upon verse 11 in chapter 13 and then passes directly on to take up the very last words of verse 14: "et carnis providentiam ne feceritis in con-

¹⁸ Of the previously-mentioned chapters from *Romans*, two articles have appeared on frequently cited verses: Goulven Madec, "Connaissance de Dieu et action de grâces. Essai sur les citations de l'Épître aux Romains I, 18-25 dans l'œuvre de saint Augustin", *Recherches Augustiniennes* 2 (1962), 273-309 and Anne-Marie La Bonnardière, "Le verset paulinien Rom. v, 5 dans l'œuvre de saint Augustin", *Augustinus Magister* (1954), vol. II, pp. 657-665.

¹⁹ The general tone of enthusiasm which permeates Augustine's earlier works flares up to fiery climaxes in such events as the discovery of Cicero's *Hortensius* (*De beata vita* 1, 4 and *Conf.* III, 4, 7-8) and the discovery of the books of the "Platonists" (*Contra Academicos* II, 2, 5 and *Conf.* VII, 9, 13 to 21, 27).

²⁰ *Retractationes* II, 4, 1. *Romans* xiii, 12-14 is cited in *De doctrina christiana* IV, 20, 40.

cupiscentiis.”²¹ This omission means ignoring the revelling and drunkenness and other vices condemned by Paul. More significantly, it constitutes an omission of consideration of Paul’s advice to put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Most significantly of all, it constitutes an omission of all but the very last words of *Romans* xiii, 13-14. It is therefore a very casual treatment of these very same verses to which Augustine is soon to attribute his conversion in the *Confessions*—a conversion which occurred some eight years before the writing of the *Expositio*. And within six years, the *Confessions* is to appear with its high-lighting of the impact of *Romans* xiii, 13-14 right at the climactic moment of Augustine’s conversion. Yet what remains of that ecstatic impact in the appropriate section of the *Expositio*? What remains there of the role of those Pauline verses in the unforgettable conversion-scene of the *Confessions*? Verse 13 is not even singled out for comment. Of the fourteenth verse, only the last few words are selected for exegesis. No less surprising is what Augustine has to say about this verse-fragment:

Quod autem ait, ‘Et carnis providentiam ne feceritis in concupiscentiis,’ ostendit non esse culpandam carnis providentiam, quando ea providentur quae ad necessitatem salutis corporalis valent. Si autem ad superfluas delectationes atque luxurias, ut quisque in his gaudeat quae carne cupit, recte reprehenditur, quia providentiam carnis in concupiscentiis facit. ‘Quoniam qui seminat in carne sua, de carne metet corruptionem’ [*Gal.* vi, 8], id est, qui delectationibus carnalibus gaudet.²²

It is difficult indeed to believe that this is the commentary by the same person who had undergone the dramatic conversion some eight years before, as described in the eighth book of the *Confessions*. As Buchheit has so well shown,²³ the whole of the eighth book leads up to the breaking of the bonds of sexual concupiscence. The extreme severity of the struggle cannot be doubted by any student of the *Confessions*. Moreover, it is precisely from those same bonds that Augustine is there liberated by the reading of *Romans* xiii, 13-14, which, as the description has it, for ever after changes his life. But where, one may ask, in the above commentary from the *Expositio*, is the slightest trace, if not of the harrowing struggle, then at least of the claim implicit in the description of the *Confessions* that the earlier reading of *Romans* xiii, 13-14 had for ever after changed Augustine’s spiritual life? How could he comment even on the verse-fragment some eight years later without betraying some acknowledgement of the profound spiritual revolution which that par-

²¹ *Op. cit.*, 76-77.

²² *Ibid.*, 77.

²³ Vinzenz Buchheit, “Augustinus unter dem Feigenbaum (zu *Conf.* VIII)”, in *Vigiliae Christianae*, 22 (1968), 257-271.

ticular text had wrought in his life during the conversion-scene of the *Confessions*?

The questions become all the more unanswerable when one considers just what associations the verse-fragment does evoke in the above-cited commentary from the *Expositio*. As is seen, the first thing which comes to Augustine's mind is the legitimacy of a certain preoccupation in regard to one's future material needs "quae ad necessitatem salutis corporalis valent," as the extract has it. But if that preoccupation becomes excessive, either in itself, or in its objects, then such preoccupation about future needs has assumed the character of concupiscence and is condemnable—"recte reprehenditur, quia providentiam carnis in concupiscentiis facit." All of this is legitimate enough, but where is the slightest indication that the verse-fragment in question had recently revolutionised Augustine's life and indeed had revolutionised it, *not* under the character of *providentia*, but rather under the character of *concupiscentiae*? Furthermore, the transformation had occurred, not under the general character of *concupiscentiae* as in most of the cited extract, but rather under the specific character of *concupiscentia sexualis*, as the eighth book of the *Confessions* makes abundantly clear. Yet, notwithstanding the supreme relevance of that specific character in the eighth book, and presumably in Augustine's reformed life after the conversion therein described, the above commentary on the verse-fragment makes not the slightest allusion to that specific character.

There remains only one other occasion on which *Romans* xiii, 13-14 is mentioned in the writings prior to the *Confessions*. That occasion is in the *Epistola XXII* of 392 to Aurelius the Bishop of Carthage.²⁴ Both verses are indeed cited at the end of the second paragraph of the letter, but an examination of the context renders quite manifest the reason for their presence. As the middle of the same paragraph informs the reader, the letter is concerned with the many carnal blemishes and disorders which affect the African Church. Specifically, it is question of rioting and drunkenness (*comessationes et ebrietates*) which not only are publicly tolerated, but even are a feature of the ceremonies to honour the memories of the blessed martyrs.²⁵ It would be difficult to find a scriptural quotation more pointedly appropriate to condemning these most unholy practices than *Romans* xiii, 13-14. Its presence on this occasion could therefore hardly be considered significant in terms of the purpose of this present study.

To summarise then; in view of the supreme importance of *Romans* xiii, 13-14 to the climax of Augustine's conversion as described in the

²⁴ PL 33, 582.

²⁵ Cf. *Conf.* VI, 2, 2.

eight book of the *Confessions* and considering that no less than a heavenly voice led him to make the fateful reading of those precious verses, there has been seen to be an astounding absence of allusions to the same verses in works subsequent to Augustine's conversion, but prior to the writing of the *Confessions*. Furthermore, on the occasion that Augustine does comment on a fragment of those verses, both the manner of treatment and the contents of the commentary itself are such as to belie yet again the supreme importance claimed for *Romans* xiii, 13-14 at the climactic moment of Augustine's conversion as described in the eighth book of the *Confessions*. As a result of such considerations, it would seem that *Romans* xiii, 13-14 was *not* of particular importance to Augustine prior to the writing of the *Confessions* somewhere in the period of 397-401 AD. It is also noteworthy that for at least some ten years after the appearance of the *Confessions*, *Romans* xiii, 13-14, is not featured on any significant occasions.²⁶

So much then for the importance of those particular verses of Paul in works of Augustine's other than the *Confessions*. Another detail in the conversion-scene suggests a similar inquiry in regard to the conversion of Augustine's friend, Alypius, who, as the account has it, was also converted on the same occasion by reading from Paul:

He asked to look at what I had read. I showed him; and he looked even further than I had read, and I knew not what followed. This it was, verily, 'Him that is weak in the faith, receive ye;' [*Rom.* xiv, 1] which he applied to himself. (*Conf.* VIII, 12, 30).

Here we are on different ground, for the verse in question is the opening of *Romans* xiv in which Paul tried to settle conflicts among converts over dietary observances sanctioned by their previous religions. As I have tried to show elsewhere, this particular subject (and therefore

²⁶ Again, this observation is from the 1836-38 Gaume edition of the *Opera Omnia* (see footnote 6). The absence of references to *Romans* xiii, 13-14 is also significant in that it would seem to indicate that Augustine did not feel himself obliged to continue giving to those verses the spectacular and unprecedented prominence which they attained at the very moment of his conversion, as narrated in *Conf.* VIII, 12, 29. In other words, the particular importance of those verses to Augustine would seem to have begun and ended with their role as artistic embellishments in the portrayal of the conversion-scene. It is also noteworthy that the same verdict applies to Augustine's sermons of the period 386 to 410. On the other hand, sermons 205 and 230 do indeed contain full-length quotes of *Romans* xiii, 13 & 14, but the chronology of these sermons is unknown (A. Kunzelmann, 'Die Chronologie der Sermones des hl. Augustinus' in *Miscellanea Agostiniana* Roma, 1930/31. A. Casamassa, editor), vol. II, pp. 512-521). Elsewhere in the whole range of the sermons, the presence of *Romans* xiii, 13-14 is far from significant. The opening words, *Sicut in die honeste ambulemus* are the only ones to be found, and then on but two occasions (*Sermo* 49, 3, 3 & *Sermo* 99, 1, 1). Even less can be said about the presence of *Romans* xiii, 13-14 in the *Enarrationes in Psalmos*.

this chapter from Paul) was of particular personal interest to Augustine.²⁷ The Manichees, to which Augustine had belonged prior to his conversion, were very much concerned with dietary details on the basis of their religious principles. Understandably, most of *Romans* xiv is cited in Augustine's early anti-Manichean treatise: *De moribus ecclesiae Catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum* of 388-390. In fact, *Romans* xiv is cited, not once, but twice.²⁸ On both occasions, the issue is far removed from the garden-scene of the *Confessions* and concerns the Manichees' claim that certain foods are intrinsically immoral. Significantly too, on one of the occasions, the opening verse (which concerns as here) is omitted.²⁹ It is noteworthy that the whole of *Romans* xiv is quoted in another anti-Manichean treatise and for the same reason. The work in question is the *Contra Adimantum* of 394.³⁰ In view of the common context therefore, none of the above cases could be seriously counted as evidence for the authenticity of the portion of *Romans* xiv, 1 as featured in the conversion-scene of the *Confessions*.

There is however one exegesis of *Romans* xiv, 1 which does merit examination for the purposes of the present study. The commentary in question is to be found in the previously mentioned *Expositio quarundam propositionum ex Epistola ad Romanos* of 394/5 which therefore preceded the appearance of the *Confessions* by some three to six years. At first sight a similarity between the exegesis in the *Expositio* and the relevant passage in the conversion-scene of the *Confessions* would seem to avail, as would appear from a comparison of the two texts:

Expositio 78 [In xiv, 1-3]:

Confessiones VIII, 12, 30:

Quod autem dicit, *Infirmum autem in fide recipite, non in dijudicationibus cogitationum*, hoc dicit, ut eum qui infirmus in fide est, recipiamus, ut nostra firmitate infirmitatem ejus sustineamus, neque dijudicemus cogitationes ejus, id est, quasi ferre audeamus sententiam de alieno corde, quod non videmus.

[Alypius] petit uidere quid legissem: ostendi, et adtendit etiam ultra quam ego legeram. et ignorabam quid sequeretur. sequebatur uero: *infirmum autem in fide recipite*. quod ille ad se rettulit mihi que aperuit. sed tali admonitione firmatus est placitoque ac proposito bono et congruentissimo suis moribus, quibus a me in melius iam olim ualde longeque distabat, sine ulla turbulenta cunctatione coniunctus est.³¹

²⁷ Leo C. Ferrari, "The Guastatory Augustine," *Augustiniana* 29 (1979), pp. 304-315.

²⁸ *Op. cit.* I, 33, 71 and II, 14, 32.

²⁹ *Op. cit.* I, 33, 71.

³⁰ *Op. cit.* 14, 2.

³¹ The topic of judging others receives further elaboration along the lines argued for here, in the succeeding paragraph of the *Expositio*.

However, a closer comparison of the two extracts shows that similarities are accidental. In the case of the passage from the *Expositio*, the injunction against passing judgement on the thoughts of those who are infirm in the faith is directly evoked by the wording in the verse cited. With the extract from the *Confessions*, there is indeed the inability of Augustine to divine the thoughts of Alypius, who however, far from being infirm in the faith, was in Augustine's opinion, much better disposed than was Augustine himself. Finally, besides these chance similarities, there remain the differences in intent about the divining of thoughts in both cases. The extract from the *Expositio* is concerned with the suppression of judgements about the thoughts of those who are infirm in the faith. On the other hand, the passage from the *Confessions* neither discourages, nor encourages judgement, but deals simply with a revelation made by Alypius about his own secret thoughts. In the last place, apart from the verse-fragment common to both extracts, there are no common words or phrases which would suggest that Augustine had in mind the *Expositio* exegesis when writing the passage from the *Confessions*, or to suggest that both passages have a common source of inspiration in Augustine's personal experience. So much then for *Romans* xiv, 1 in Augustine's writings between his conversion and the writing of the *Confessions*. No comments which he makes on that verse elsewhere would betray the importance it possesses in the conversion of Alypius as described in *Confessions* VIII, 12, 30.

From the previous considerations it must be concluded that there is an incredible indifference to *Romans* xiii, 13-14 and *Romans* xiv, 1 in Augustine's writings between his conversion and the appearance of the *Confessions* in 397-401. Considering the supreme importance imputed to those particular texts in the conversion scene of the *Confessions*, one can only conclude that those particular texts did *not* function in the real conversions of Augustine and Alypius after the manner in which these are depicted in the *Confessions*. Rather would it seem that those textual encounters are artistic embellishments added later in Augustine's carefully constructed portrayal of their conversion. The *tolle lege* episode would thus be a fiction of Augustine's genius.³² If this conclusion be conceded, then the question arises as to what remains of the actual role of Paul's writings in the real conversion of Augustine (and also, of course, of Alypius). This would remain a matter for idle conjecture were it not

³² As well be explained hereunder, the *tolle lege* episode would seem to be a most effective fictional device for expressing the essence of what had happened to Augustine well before the garden-scene. It would seem that on that earlier occasion he had indeed seized "most eagerly" upon the writings of the Apostle Paul and had received enlightenment of a crucial nature from them. It will be argued that this earlier episode has become the raw material for the *tolle lege* scene.

for the fact that Augustine has provided us with vital clues (yet again) in his other writings.

In the *De beata vita* of 386, writing to one, Manlius Theodorus, Augustine describes his pilgrimage back to the Catholic Church of his childhood in terms of a sea-voyage to the safe port of *philosophia*. Containing as it does, only a very general reference to his venture into the Scriptures, the account would seem at first sight only remotely relevant to the present question. However, a reference to a significant reading of certain books of the "Platonists" before embarking upon the investigation of the Scriptures, reminds one immediately of an identical sequence in *Conf.* VII, 20, 26 and 21, 27. The passage of interest in the *De beata vita* is addressed to Theodorus as follows:

Lectis autem Platonis paucissimis libris, cujus te esse studiosissimus accepi, collataque cum eis, quantum potui, etiam illorum auctoritate qui divina mysteria tradiderunt, sic exarsi, ut omnes illas vellem anchoras rumpere, nisi me nonnullorum hominum existimatio commoveret.³³

Likewise, in *Conf.* VII, 20, 26, Augustine underlines insistently the importance of his having come upon the books by the Platonists before he ventured into a study of the Scriptures. Then, prepared by his reading of the books of the Platonists, he says of his venture into the Scriptures: "Itaque auidissime arripui uenerabilem stilum spiritus tui et prae ceteris apostolum Paulum." (*Conf.* VII, 21, 27). Assuming that the venture into the Scriptures, as described in the *De beata vita* is the very same venture as the one just cited, then the conclusion remains that for reasons best known to Augustine, the reference to Paul has been omitted in the text addressed to Theodorus. Notwithstanding this omission, the description in the *Confessions* makes it abundantly evident that Paul was of especial interest to Augustine in that initial venture into the Scriptures.

The same conclusion is most explicit in yet another description of that same early venture into the Scriptures. This time the description is from the *Contra Academicos*, composed in 386 and just prior to the *De beata vita*. Again, Augustine writes of his yearning after *philosophia*, then mentions certain plenteous books (*libri quidam pleni*) which inflamed him with an incredible zeal (*mihi ipsi de meipso incredibile incendium concitarunt*) which taught him to despise fame and honours.³⁴ Then that religion which had been implanted in him from his childhood began drawing him near to it, with the result that he seized most anxiously upon

³³ *Op. cit.*, 4. Also, on these comparisons see Solignac's introduction, pp. 64-68 in volume 13 of the *Oeuvres de saint Augustin* which contains the first seven books of the *Confessions*.

³⁴ *Op. cit.*, II, 2, 5.

the writings of the Apostle Paul: "Itaque titubans, properans, haesitans arripio apostolum Paulum . . . perlegi totum intentissime atque cautissime." ³⁵ This of course reminds one of the description in *Conf.* VII, 21, 27: "Itaque audissime arripui uenerabilem stilum spiritus tui et prae ceteris apostolum Paulum." One can therefore conclude with reasonable certainty that the above episode from the *Contra Academicos* is but another description of the same act of seizing eagerly upon the writings of the Apostle Paul.

We have then, three accounts of an event whose importance to Augustine's spiritual development is evidenced, not merely by the tone of urgency in each description, but also by the fact that Augustine returns to that event three times in his writings. Judging by the position of the account of the event in the *Confessions* (VII, 21, 27), it occurred quite some time prior to the well-known seizing upon the volume of Paul in the conversion-scene (*Conf.* VIII, 12, 29).³⁶

Moreover, it is the argument of the present study that this last-mentioned seizing upon the volume of Paul did not in fact occur as described. This claim has been substantiated by the lack of significance attached to *Romans* xiii, 13-14 by Augustine in his writings between his actual conversion and the account of it appearing some dozen years later in the eighth book of the *Confessions*. This argument from silence becomes all the more persuasive when compared with that repeated insistence upon that other, and earlier seizing of the writings of the Apostle. Moreover, the demonstrated reality of this earlier action suggests that it is both the inspiration and the source of the later detail in the conversion-scene. Just as Augustine had returned to that earlier experience for the incident of reading from Paul in this scene, so too he returned to the place where he had left Alypius in order to seize upon the volume of Paul and read the verses which were to change his life: "itaque concitus redii in eum locum, ubi sedebat Alypius: ibi enim posueram codicem apostoli, cum inde surrexeram, arripui, aperui et legi in silentio capitulum, quo primum coniecti sunt oculi mei." (*Conf.* VIII, 12, 29).

³⁵ *Ibid.* Note too the *perlegi totum intentissime atque cautissime*, which contrasts with the reading of merely two verses in the conversion-scene.

³⁶ Thus, as the ensuing description in the text makes clear, he was still a long way from the scene of his final conversion. Accordingly, he refers to seeing the land of peace in the far distance, with a difficult journey ahead before he can reach his goal. Moreover, several events of significance intervene, including the visit with Simplicianus and the episode with Pontitianus. Only after these, and well towards the end of the eighth book does the final conversion-scene take place. In view of such considerations, I cannot agree with Courcelle that the seizing upon the writings of Paul in *Conf.* VII, 21, 27 and in *Conf.* VIII, 12, 29 are one and the same. This is a claim which (with one or two rare exceptions) is also out of accord with the scholarly tradition. For Courcelle's identification, see his *Recherches*, pp. 308-309.

The above explanation of Augustine's two descriptions in the *Confessions* of his seizing upon the writings of Paul is to be contrasted with the explanation by that eminent Augustinian scholar, John J. O'Meara. His claim is that the enduring impact of the 'tolle lege' episode has produced a perceptible effect upon the very language used by Augustine in his description of the earlier discovery of Paul in *Conf.* VII, 21, 27, as well as in two other descriptions of this same episode, as found in the *Contra Academicos* and the *De beata vita*. Thus, O'Meara argues that the very recurrence of certain words in these three descriptions would indicate the enduring impact upon Augustine (and therefore imply the historical veracity) of the now-famous "tolle lege" scene. In essence, Augustine could not describe the earlier discovery of Paul without betraying by those above-mentioned recurring words, the enduring intense emotions associated with the similar act of seizing upon the writings of Paul as described in the "tolle lege" episode.³⁷

It would seem that the present study has now rendered the above hypothesis untenable, at least to the extent of requiring a shift of emphasis. A more likely explanation would now seem to involve two clarifications. First, there was indeed an earlier and highly significant seizing upon the writings of the Apostle Paul. The importance of this episode for Augustine cannot be denied, since, as noted above, he refers to it on three occasions in his writings. One is reminded of the similar case involving repeated allusions to his discovery of Cicero's *Hortensius*.³⁸ Secondly, it was that earlier discovery of the writings of Paul which was subsequently to become an ingredient of the conversion-scene. This has been so powerfully portrayed by Augustine as to become unforgettable. Such was the gifted genius of the former orator, turned into a minister of God's Word and destined to become a saint.

In conclusion, the above explanation would seem to be compatible with the principal aim of the *Confessions*, which far from being an account of Augustine's former life for the entertainment of the curious, rather aims to raise the mind and heart of the reader to a fruitful communion with God so that, as the author says of the pages of his masterpiece: *cum leguntur et audiuntur, excitant cor ne dormiat in desperatione et dicat, Non possum.*

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³⁷ John J. O'Meara, *The Young Augustine; The Growth of St. Augustine's Mind up to his Conversion*, London, 1954, pp. 187-190, as also in his "Arripui, aperui, et legi" in *Augustinus Magister*, vol. I, pp. 59-65.

³⁸ *Conf.* X, 3, 4 where Augustine treats at some length of his reasons for writing the *Confessions*. See also *Epistola CCXXXI*, 6 and *Retractationes* II, 6, 1.