Augustine's Conception of Deification, Revisited

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The theology of Augustine of Hippo, a veritable font for religious thought in the Latin West for the past 1600 years, rarely dwells on the subject of deification. Certainly in comparison to its prominent place in Eastern Christian thought, the language of deification scarcely enters Augustine's mind (if we take the surviving literary works as evidence). The careful evaluation of Augustine's limited use of this concept has been undertaken by Gerald Bonner; his is the definitive statement.[1] Since the publication of Bonner's article in 1986, however, we have been privy to the unexpected discovery of new sermons of Augustine.[2] Thanks to these new findings, we can now supply a modest addendum to Bonner's work, given that deification is the key idea in one of these letters, the one known as *Dolbeau*

[1] Gerald Bonner, "Augustine's Conception of Deification," *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 37 (1986) 369–86.

[2] See Francois Dolbeau, "Nouveau sermons de saint Augustin pour la conversion des paiens et des donatistes (V)," *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* 39 (1993) 57–108; and also *The Works of Saint Augustine: Newly Discovered Sermons*, tr. Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 1990).

6 or *Mainz* 13. Augustine supplies an extended meditation in *Dolbeau* 6 on a subject so seldom mentioned elsewhere. In what is a homiletic exposition of Psalm 81, he gives voice to a rich theological anthropology. In so doing, he connects the concept of a "deifying God" *(deificatorem deum)* to the soul's spiritual warfare, the biblical vision of salvation history, and the gathering of members of the ecclesial "Body of Christ."

The Principal Passages

Bonner cites only fifteen examples of the words DEIFICARI and DEIFICATUS (and seven of these, he argues, are "irrelevant" to the theology of deification). Among the "relevant" passages he includes:

***Ep*. 10.2:** Augustine laments to his close childhood friend, Nebridius, that "amid uproar and restless comings and goings" a person cannot "achieve the familiarity with death that we are seeking. For in leisure . . . [one] would be permitted to become godlike" [in contemplation].[3] This letter, written ca. 388–91, dates to the period after his conversion and baptism, but before his ordination as a priest in Hippo. An echo of the youthful Augustine's Neoplatonic yearning for the fulfillment of the philosophical life can be heard here.

***Enarrat. In Ps*. 49.2**: Here we find multiple references clustered together: (i) In reference to Psalm 81, he says, "It is quite obvious that God called human beings "gods" in the sense that they were *deified by his grace*,[4] not because they were born of his own substance." (ii) ". . . . He alone deifies who is God of himself, not by participation in any other."[5] (iii) "Moreover he who justifies is the same as he who deifies, because by justifying us he made us sons and daughters of God . . ." (iv) "If we have been made children of God, we have been made into gods; but we are such by the grace of him who adopts us."[6] This *enarratio* (explanation)

[3] *Letters 1–99. The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century,* vol. II/1, tr. Roland Teske, S.J. (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 2001) 34.

[4] My italics.

[5] Bonner, "Augustine's Conception," 384.

[6] *Expositions of the Psalms* (33–50). *The Works of Saint Augustine* (same series), vol. III/16, tr. Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 2000) 381.

exhibits special affinity with our sermon in question, *Dolbeau* 6; the use of *deificatio* is sustained and is applied to the Christian mysteries.

***Enarrat. in Ps.* 117.11:** Commenting on "The Lord's right hand has proved its might," Augustine writes, "Great might is needed to raise up the lowly, to deify a mere mortal, to make the weak perfect, to grant glory through abasement and victory through suffering."[7]

***Serm.* 126.14:** "And there he stood, in front of the eyes of a servant, in the form of a servant, saving the form of God for deified eyes, and he said to him, *Am I with you all this time, and you do not know me?"*[8] (dated to 417 AD).

***Serm.* 166.4:** "God, you see, wants to make you a god; not by nature, of course, like the one whom he begot; but by his gift and by adoption"[9] (dated to after 410 AD).

From the limited evidence, Bonner drew several astute conclusions:

(1) Augustine "believed his teaching on deification was based on Scripture"[10] and he rejected the Plotinian idea that deification could be achieved by the independent efforts of a philosopher, unaided by grace; deification was possible only "from a participation in God made possible by divine initiative."[11]

(2) The "christocentricity" of Augustine's thought was integrated into his understanding of deification; Augustine says clearly that "adoption by grace" is impossible without the mediation of the God-man. Augustine does, like the Greek Fathers, use the language of "participation" in God,[12] and he was in agreement with the theologies of both Irenaeus and Athanasius[13] (Bonner cites *Serm*. 192.1: "To make gods those who were men, He was made man who is God").

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[7] *Expositions of the Psalms* (99–120). *The Works*, vol. III/19, tr. Maria Boulding (2003) 337.

[8] *Sermons (94A–147A) On The New Testament. The Works*, vol. III/4, tr. Edmund Hill, O.P. (1992) 278.

[9] *Sermons (148–183) On The New Testament. The Works*, vol. III/5, tr. Edmund Hill (1992) 209.

[10] Bonner, "Augustine's Conception," 371.

[11] Ibid., 372.

[12] Ibid., 373–74.

[13] Ibid., 376.

(3) Augustine's understanding of the unity of Christ and His church is closely associated with his use of deification: the elevation of humanity as adopted sons and daughters involves not only individual believers, but the whole church.[14] Moreover, deification is, in Augustine's thought, "a state which will be attained only in the life to come." There can be no claims to final perfection in this life; deification in its fullness is eschatological.

(4) Though the use of the term, *deificatio*, is scarce, "Augustine was apparently prepared to equate justification and deification, regarding both as the consequence of man's adoption." Bonner refers to the same *Enarrat. In Ps.* 49, cited above: "For He justifies, who is just of Himself and not of another; and He deifies, who is God of Himself and not by participation in another. Now He who justifies, Himself deifies, because by justifying He makes sons of God."

(5) Further, Bonner argues that deification is a matter for consideration within "dogmatic" theology rather than "contemplative" theology, because "it describes the consequences of the saving work of Christ rather than a mystical state enjoyed by a contemplative." In response to this assertion, one may reasonably question, however, whether such a distinction between "dogmatic" and "contemplative" types of theology would have been made by Augustine himself. It can be argued, moreover, that when Augustine spoke, in either catechetical or polemical tones, his threefold aim was to teach, to persuade and to delight (and the first of these was paramount). All of his work he wished to be edifying, for his teaching "with the help of the divine testimonies" aimed to "induce belief" by garnering obedience to their authority.[15] The delineation between dogmatic and contemplative tasks is ours, and not Augustine's. For him, all theology ought to be *both* dogmatic (insofar as it is sound in its articulation) *and* contemplative (insofar as it coaxes the deepening of faith).

Bonner's understanding of deification in Augustine's thought does indeed ring true in light of our "new" sermon of Augustine. *Dolbeau 6* has for its focus Psalm 81: "God has stood up in the synagogue of gods," and it begins with a remarkably dense catechetical passage (6.1) on the dynamics

[14] Ibid., 375–76.

[15] *On Christian Teaching*, IV.146; tr. R. P. H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

of deification. "We carry mortality about with us, we endure infirmity, we look forward to divinity. For God wishes not only to vivify, but also to deify us." *(Gerimus mortalitatem, toleramus infirmitatem, exspectamus diuinitatem. Vult enim deus non solum uiuificare, sed etiam deificare nos.)* Augustine reassures his audience that it is "God's promise" that persons will be made gods. In true Athanasian fashion, he repeats the age-old axiom of Christian hope: "The Son of God became a son of man, in order to make sons of men into sons of God." (*Filius dei factus est filius hominis, ut filios hominum faceret filios dei.*) Augustine tells of a forward-looking vision: what has begun with the incarnation will be completed in the future, will be made manifest at a definite time (*certo tempore apparebit*). The promise of God is that He will make human persons "gods not by nature but by adoption, by grace." The "true God," he proclaims, is a "deifying God" (*deificatorem deum*), a "god-making God" (*deificum deum*).

There is abundant optimism in this opening section, wherein Augustine accentuates the end and goal of Christian hope.

Augustinian Polemic

On this day, however, we find Augustine in a fighting mood. His catechesis and spiritual guidance were laced with polemical concern. He set the stage for an argument with his initial comments: the gods that are made by the hand of a craftsman are not like the gods made by the "true" God. "Our God," he says, makes us into gods, but "*they* worship gods they make" (*Vos adoratis deum, qui uos facit deos; illi autem adorant deos, quos faciendo et adorando perdunt ut ipsi dii fiant*), thus criticizing pagan practices of idol worship, which must have been, given his attention to the matter, still very prevalent in the North Africa of 404, when this sermon was delivered.[16]

[16] Francois Dolbeau has argued, regarding the circumstances of the delivery of this sermon, for the likelihood that Augustine was not in a rural township but in a town or city where some people in his audience understood Greek (see para. 2). He further places the sermon, along with *Mainz* 12, in Carthage in the winter of 403–404. Augustine was engaged in an ongoing refutation of the pagan religious practices alive in North Africa, a region that had received many lavish imperial monuments to the gods, dating back to the Severan dynasty. But now, legal interdiction against the pagan cults, which took force in the late fourth century, was blamed for the multiplication of civil troubles and for natural

When one worships the product of one's own hand, he warns, one loses the chance to become a god; the crafting of idols amounts to a "falling away" and lost opportunity (6.3).

Augustine asks, so what do people want: to become gods, or to make gods? (*Quid ergo uolunt homines: dii fieri, an deos facere?*) (6.3). One can sense the word play of a master rhetorician coming to the fore. He calls upon his audience to worship not "what you have made" but instead "the one who made you." The "godless" fashion an image "and slap a name on it" (*imponere illi nomen*). He makes an appeal to the self-respect of those in the crowd: "It is an insult to you (*iniuria tibi est*) that you should be like the one you have made" (6.5). The creation of the human person as *imago Dei* bestows dignity on all individuals. That someone would hope to be like an idol should arouse an indignant response, he insists. Why? Because an idol cannot do justice to the depth of "your inner self" (*interiorem hominem tuum*). Augustine calls upon people to use their intelligence "to see the truth" (*uis uidere ueritatem*). The inner self, he tells them, was bestowed with "all the senses," and these ought to be used to recognize the dignity of the human person, not to "become like the caricature, the idol" (*simulacro*).

> If the inner self becomes somehow or other insensitive, stupid, he becomes in a certain manner like an idol, and having ruined in himself the image of the one by whom he was made, he wishes to take on the image of the one which he has made [*si fiat insensatus quodammodo homo interior, fit ad quendam modum similis simulacro et, perdita in se imagine eius a quo factus est, eius quem fecit uult capere imaginem*]. (6.5)[17]

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catastrophes. Pagan complaints during the 'tempora christiana' abounded. Amidst the provocation and counter-provocation, we find Augustine appealing to unusual language, "un terme inhabituel," as Dolbeau says, *deificatio* (*Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes,* 39 [1993] 57–108).

[17] Would some of the people in his audience be familiar with Augustine's own story of how he had long sullied the image of the one who made him? It had been six years or more since the writing of his *Confessions*. Augustine had admitted that he remained 'ignorant' of what it meant to be created in God's image, and that he even 'insulted and opposed' the idea, being 'deceived with promises of certainty' by the Manichees as well as his own 'childish error and rashness' (*Confessions*, VI.iv [5], trans. Henry Chadwick [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991]).

With the aid of the "spirit of God," he continues, it is possible to discern properly, and to see one's unlikeness to the simulacrum of the idol. He laments those who lack such discernment, but their lack of discernment, he reassures, is no loss of "God's work in themselves," which can never be killed (6.7). Augustine further chides those who trust in the impotency of idols, and he warns of the power of "our God" to cast demon worshippers "into the eternal fire" (6.9). (He equates the *numina* of the idols with demons.) He cautions his audience against the temptation to seek counsel from diviners or soothsayers (6.10). He equates such superstitious action with "seeking the society of demons" (*socius daemoniorum*) and the forfeiture of a divine inheritance as an "associate of Christ" (*socius Christi*). Those who heard him, he assumes, were "under enormous pressures" (6.11), affected by illness and strife, and thus vulnerable to the balm of the diviners. Augustine, as bishop, appears keenly aware of the quoditian tribulations of the *parvuli* (little ones), whose faith he cared for.

After this excursus into condemning idolatry, he returns to the matter of deification. He reminds his listeners that Christians were not called to lives of comfort and luxury, and that they must endure their hardships (*ferto condicionem tuam*). Such suffering is part and parcel of life after the Fall: "Indeed, it was our very nature that first sinned, and we derive from there what we are born with" (6.11) *(Etenim ipsa natura nostra prima peccauit, et ducimus inde quod nascimur).* The endurance of suffering will lead to the immortal possession of deification, he assures. The divine initiative is directed at sufferers who will be "recreated" into blessed immortals (*Dicit creator: "Recreabo uos"*). Deification does not occur in the isolated peace of the quiet, contemplative life, or in the seclusion of retreat, but rather it begins in the "craftsman's furnace" (*fornax artificis*), in this "world full of scandals, iniquities, corruption, oppression" (6.12). He tells his flock that they find themselves in the age of the "oil press" and the screws are being tightened so as to separate the oil from the dregs (6.15). He speaks not to a spiritual elite who have chosen Mary's "better part," but instead to many Martha's who cannot but help find themselves engaged in worldly toil.

This sermon, *Dolbeau* 6, offers us a concrete example of Augustine *the theologian* translating core ideas of more detailed and targeted doctrinal works into the pastoral concerns of Augustine *the bishop*. In appealing to

the inherent dignity of persons created in the image of God, Augustine echoes some of the concerns of *The Trinity,* which he had begun in 400 and would not complete until 416, thus placing *Dolbeau* 6 (dated to 404) in the midst of his meditations on the three Persons of the Godhead. In *The Trinity*, he implores his reader: "With the example of the Image [Christ] before us, let us also not depart from God. For we are, likewise, the image of God, not indeed an equal image, since it was made by the Father through the Son, not born of the Father as that is" (VII.3.5).[18] (Hence Augustine's distinction in *Dolbeau* 6 that one is made a "son of God" not in substance or by nature, but rather by grace.) The human person is an image of the Image, and is called to imitate the Image by "striving." Further, he writes, "For the true honor of man is to be the image and the likeness of God which is preserved only in relation to Him by whom it is impressed" (XII.11.16). Contrariwise, man's "likeness to the beasts is his disgrace" (XII.11.16). The best possession of the immortal soul is the "image of God its Creator," something that will not cease to be (XIV.2.4). We look into a mirror to see an image, he writes, and by looking *through* our own image we may catch a glimpse of "Him by whom we have been made." Augustine cites 2 Cor 3.18: "But we, with face unveiled, beholding the glory of God, are transformed into the same image . . . " Human persons, as the *imago Dei*, share in God's glory (XV. 8.14). Being the image of the blessed Trinity, human persons are endowed with memory, understanding, and will, which are themselves intended for remembering, seeing, and loving God (XV.20.39). In *Dolbeau* 6, Augustine is especially keen on insisting that the sacred image of God within the human person not be defiled by the worship of corrupt idols. That which is worshipped ought to glorify and not debase the image of God within. The intimate relationship between worship and theological anthropology seems never far from Augustine's mind, as he implores his audience to remember their created dignity.

Many of the above theological ruminations were made audible in the living church addressed by Augustine in 404. The concerns voiced in *Dolbeau* 6 fit a particular historical context; they reveal Augustine engaged in battle, yet again. As Peter Brown has remarked, in a new addition to his

[18] *The Trinity*, tr. Stephen McKenna, C.S.S.R. (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1963).

classic work, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography,* we find "an Augustine [in 404] struggling with all the rhetorical and didactic resources at his disposal to keep the Christian congregation from being absorbed back into a world in which Christianity had by no means yet captured the cultural high ground."[19] The "triumph" of Christianity was in no way complete at this point in North Africa's history. Another sermon from earlier in the same year (*Dolbeau* 198; *Mainz* 62), delivered on the *Kalends* feast of January 1, 404, serves to illustrate this point and merits brief comparison, given its many common themes. Augustine faced his audience then on the "festival of the nations," when people indulged in "the joys of the world and the flesh, with the din of silly and disgraceful songs" (198.1). He warned that mixing with non-Christians was "not safe and sound" (198.2), if it led to the corruption of virtue: "Are you going to join today in the celebration of good luck presents [on the feast of Fortuna] with a pagan, going to play at dice with a pagan, going to get drunk with a pagan?" (198.2) Augustine called upon his people instead to fast, as they wrestled (he would hope) with their consciences. He knew there was great temptation for Christians to join in the "frivolities," "extravagant pleasures," "unrestrained drunkenness," and gambling—it was a time of great excess (198.8). Augustine was aware that engaging in such activity was morally reprehensible, and further, defiled one's interior life. He urged people to protect the "temple of prayer" which is the heart; to keep one's "inner room" guarded against "bodily allurements" (198.1).[20] It is curious,

[19] Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, new ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 2000) 457. Brown adds, "The sermons preached by Augustine in 404 were nothing less than a series of master classes on the nature of true relations between God and man" (458).

[20] Regarding the veneration of idols (a subject closely associated with an inability to discern the image of God in humanity and the Christian hope of deification), Augustine's problem was not merely that Christians had bowed down to pagan idols, but also that Christians had engaged in unacceptable "adoration of columns or the stones of buildings in holy places, or even of pictures" in their own churches (*Serm.* 198.16). Some 'educated pagans' had, it seems, begun to challenge Christians who criticized their (pagan) image veneration—Christians too were venerating icons and physical holy places. Augustine was at pains to clarify that what ought to be worshipped is not the thing itself, but what it signifies. He wanted Christians to search for the image of the divine craftsman with the eyes of the mind (198.31), though the mind itself, wrapped up in sin, "stands in need of purification" (198.37).

however, that while Augustine's preoccupation during the *Kalends* festival was with the spiritual dangers of paganism, he did not elect to incorporate the "*deificatio*" logic of *Dolbeau* 6.

Infrequency of Deification Imagery

It is worth asking why Augustine so rarely turned to the use of the concept of deification. One clue to an answer may be found in his "magnum opus," *The City of God*, wherein deification is discussed in its pagan context, and with unfavorable criticism. Here Augustine voices his intense displeasure with the practice of deifying—and then worshiping—men; one such example being that of Diomede, who was turned into a god after being credited with founding various towns and spreading Greek culture into Italy.[21] This sort of deification is a deception, Augustine argued, and amounts to the worship of false gods. In so doing, the "living God" is neglected; "temples, altars, sacrifices and priests" become devoted to "dead men" (XVIII.18) instead of their rightful recipient. One cannot escape from "the city of this world" and advance in faith, he warns, if one is captive to the practices of "Babylon." Given the eagerness of the ancient Greeks and Romans to deify and worship their own, we can suppose that Augustine was especially cautious in using the language of deification in the Christian church, lest he mislead some into imagining that Christians themselves become equals of God Almighty. Moreover, Augustine was always wary to state unambiguously that the deified faithful do not become "God by nature" but rather "gods by grace." Augustine achieves in *Dolbeau* 6 a remarkable homiletic move: he can, on the one hand, deconstruct the pagan use of idols and, on the other, provide his own congregants food for thought on the interior life of the soul.

Henry Chadwick, in his comments on the newly discovered sermons, has remarked, "two themes appear to be recurrent [in these sermons of 404]. The first is that true religion is inward and a matter of the heart . . . A second prominent theme is that true faith will issue in a reformed moral life."[22] Augustine was first and foremost a bishop, a teacher and caretaker

[21] *The City of God*, XVIII.16ff.
[22] "New Sermons of Augustine," *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 47 (1996) 69–91.

of souls, who would consistently remind those in his care of the loftiest aspirations, for adoption by the hand of the divine architect, which, he would also declare, is not fully knowable in the present life for human persons tainted by sin. He spoke instead of the *possibilities* of human life, while not forgetting the present human condition of alienation from God.[23] As a champion of a theological view that wholly rejected the immodest Pelagian confidence in human ability to achieve perfection in this life, Augustine was loathe to overemphasize human striving independent of divine assistance; deification was not an accomplishment but a gift. All mention of deification in *Dolbeau* 6 is careful to underscore God's providential action: the divine agent acts upon the human recipient, and does so within the protective confines of the church. The faithful together await, with restless longing, the consummation of history which finds the members of the "body of Christ" transfigured into "gods." Augustine reminded people that deification was a divinely granted *possibility*, ecclesial in its dimensions, and the *telos* of present aspirations.

Lastly, it is essential to be reminded that the proper location for the language of deification was the *sacramental* life of the church community. It is no mistake that we find Augustine delivering the message of deification within a liturgical setting. He did not understand the transfiguration of humanity into "gods" to be a private affair. The piety of every individual was, Augustine believed, nurtured within the "cultus," within sacred liturgical celebrations.[24] The community was bonded together by the sacraments and unifying participation was most often felt in the shared Eucharist—itself a constant reminder of the Christian mysteries, of God's active presence in their midst, working a transformation among them. Augustine, as spiritual father, sought to communicate an understanding that "our present passage from death to life, which takes place through faith, is accomplished in the hope of the future resurrection and glory in the end."[25] A foretaste of the eschatological deification was offered in and

[23] On the subject of Augustine communicating 'possibilities,' see Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970) 68.

[24] See Frederick Van der Meer's classic work, *Augustine the Bishop: Church and Society at the Dawn of the Middle Ages*, trans. Brain Battershaw and G. R. Lamb (New York: Harper, 1961) 277ff.

[25] *Ep.* 55, trans. Roland Teske, S. J., in *The Works of Saint Augustine: Letters 1–99*, vol. II/1 (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 2001).

through the church's sacramental life. Only there could one find a haven against the many snares that populated Augustine's spiritual imagination.[26]

[26] A debt of gratitude is owed to Rev. Gabriel Coless, O.S.B. for his illuminating remarks offered in response to early drafts of this work.