

## AUGUSTINE'S CHANGING THOUGHT ON SINLESSNESS

### 1. *Introduction.*

The standard view of the Pelagian controversy as centrally concerned with the nature of grace,<sup>1</sup> while other issues of theological anthropology and soteriology (such as baptism, free will, and predestination) have orbited around this preoccupation, is largely dismissed today.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have begun to realize that those authors who have been labeled as Pelagius actually have a variety of interests and concerns. These interests and concerns, although they often overlap with each other, are much more diverse and nuanced than previous generations have allowed.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, vol. 5, Boston 1899, 170. Gerald Bonner has offered two more nuanced definitions of Pelagianism. He has distinguished between the theological heresy and the historical controversy. For the first definition, he claims that « the word Pelagianism is commonly employed in two different ways. It is used by dogmatic theologians to describe the heresy which dispenses with any need for Divine Grace and denies any transmission of Original Sin ». The second definition: « an ascetic movement within the Christian Church during the late fourth and early fifth centuries, a movement composed of disparate elements which came, in the course of time, to be associated under the name of the British theologian and exegete Pelagius, though his claim to be the dominating spirit of the movement is, at best, debatable » G. Bonner, *Augustine and Modern Research on Pelagianism*, Wetteren 1972 (The Saint Augustine lecture series), 1; Evans claimed that grace was “the real issue” R. F. Evans, *Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals*, New York 1968, 7; B. R. Rees, *Pelagius: A Reluctant Heretic*, in *Pelagius: Life and Letters*, vol. 1, Woodbridge 1998, 54.

<sup>2</sup> John Ferguson does an excellent job of outlining the many issues of this controversy: sin, original sin, the possibility of sinlessness, the person of Jesus, grace, free will, the relationship between God and humanity, the law and the gospel, infant baptism, death, and prayer, J. Ferguson, *Pelagius: A Historical and Theological Study*, Cambridge 1956, 159-182.

<sup>3</sup> G. Bonner, *Rufinus of Syria and African Pelagianism*, in *Augustinian Studies* 1 (1970), 31; R. Teske, *Introduction*, in *Answer to the Pelagians*, ed. J. E. Rotelle, Hyde Park (NY) 1997 (The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation

Although scholars have come to a greater appreciation of the diversity of thought among the Pelagians, Michael Rackett, I believe, has convincingly argued that we can still view them as a movement, not just a loose confederation of individuals, because all of the Pelagians affirmed the possibility of living a sinless life.<sup>4</sup> While Rackett has done an excellent job describing the ways the Pelagians understood sinlessness, little research has been done investigating how Augustine, the strongest critic of the Pelagians, reacted to their claims. This article will attempt to describe Augustine's changing thoughts on sinlessness.

## 2. Augustine on sinlessness.

Augustine, unfortunately, never wrote a single text that presents his thoughts regarding sinlessness—these thoughts were spread over a number of texts. One's initial response may be to force these thoughts together to construct a mosaic to give a clear picture of how he conceived of sinlessness.<sup>5</sup> As is often the case with him, however, one cannot capture his thoughts in one picture.<sup>6</sup> Rather, one

---

for the 21st Century. Part 1: Books 23), 11; P. Rousseau, *Cassian and Perverted Virtue*, Washington DC 2009, 14; D. Ogliari, *Gratia et Certamen: the Relationship between Grace and Free Will in the Discussion of Augustine with the So-called Semipelagians*, Leuven 2003, 230.

<sup>4</sup> M. Rackett, *Sexuality and Sinlessness: The Diversity among Pelagian Theologies of Marriage and Virginity*, Ph. D. dissertation Duke University 2002, 251.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Clark argues that one may think of Augustine's thought as a mosaic, but I am convinced that this way of thinking warps our understanding of him. M. Clark, *Augustine: Philosopher of Freedom*, New York 1958, 84.

<sup>6</sup> Recent scholarship has attempted to make Augustine's thought homogeneous from 386 until his death in 430: C. Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity*, Oxford 2006. This has caused a stir among Augustinian scholars: M. Boone, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity*, by Carol Harrison, in *Augustinian Studies* 40 (2009), 154-157; C. Gerber, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity*, by Carol Harrison, in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 15 (2007), 120-122; J. Lössl, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity*, by Carol Harrison, in *The Journal of Theological Studies* 58 (2007), 300-302; D. Meconi, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity*, by Carol Harrison, in *Theological Studies* 68 (2007), 180-182; J. Rist, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity*, by Carol Harrison, in *New Blackfriars* 87 (2006), 542-544; P. Rorem, *Rethinking Augustine's Early The-*

must approach them as one approaches Claude Monet's *Haystacks*, which must be viewed in succession to see how they changed over time and, only then, to come to a full appreciation of this series. In a similar fashion, we will analyze Augustine's beliefs on the possibility of sinlessness and see that they did not remain static; he changed his position several times over a few short years. We will look at his first five treatises (*De peccatorum meritis et remissione et De baptismo parvulorum*, *De spiritu et littera*, *De natura et gratia*, *De perfectione iustitiae hominis*, and *De gestis Pelagii*) and the canons of the Council of Carthage of 418 (Augustine was the key figure in constructing them) to demonstrate these changes.

Augustine wrote texts other than these five against the Pelagians, such as the work against Julian, which will not be discussed in this article because, after 418, there is little discussion about sinlessness. Why is this so? Is sinlessness, in the end, only a minor footnote? It receives little attention after Pelagius' condemnation, I argue, because of the superior rhetorical skills of Augustine, not because it becomes an irrelevant issue for his interlocutors. He, through the force of his writings, was able to shift the debate from sinlessness to his own interest: grace. This shift can best be seen at the end of his *De gestis Pelagii*.<sup>7</sup>

In his understanding of sinlessness, Augustine initially makes one claim (in *De peccatorum meritis et remissione et De baptismo parvulorum* he permits a hypothetical possibility of anyone becoming sinless because, through God's grace, anything is possible; but, there has never been anyone in the history of the world who has actually been sinless) then asserts the opposite (in *De perfectione iustitiae hominis* he allows that there have been saints in the past who have been without sin), then demonstrates that he is unsure (in *De gestis Pelagii* he admits that this matter is open for debate), and then, finally, he

---

ology: *An Argument for Continuity*, by Carol Harrison, in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62 (2009), 519-521; F. Vinel, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity*, by Carol Harrison, in *Revue des Sciences Religieuses* 82 (2008), 573-574.

<sup>7</sup> Aug., *gest. Pel.* 30, 55.

returns to his original position (through the canons of the Council of Carthage of 418, he shows that everyone has sinned).<sup>8</sup>

The idea that Augustine's understanding of the sinless life changed over time rejects established scholarly consensus. Gerald Bonner concisely offers the standard view of Augustine's thought during this debate; he claims that « Augustine was essentially restating the arguments which he had employed at the very beginning of the controversy in the *De Peccatorum Meritis et Remissione* » and that « as the controversy progressed, there occurred a change, not of doctrine but of emphasis ».<sup>9</sup> While Bonner is correct that there was expansion, refinement, and, yes, a shift in emphasis in Augustine's writings, we will see that there was also a change in several of his key thoughts on sinlessness.

### 2.1 *de peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum*.

Augustine began his reply to the notion of the possibility of living a life free from sin in his text *De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum*, probably written in 411/412, in response to a letter from Marcellinus. This letter, now lost, asked Augustine to respond to a variety of issues, including: whether or not Adam would have died if he had not sinned, whether or not sin passed to the descendants of Adam because of the fall, and whether or not people may be free from sin. Although Augustine addresses this work to Marcellinus, in reality this text is written as a response to the then unnamed opponents, whom Marcellinus brought to Augustine's attention.<sup>10</sup>

In Book II, Augustine responds to Marcellinus by asking and answering four questions: (1) whether or not one can live life without

---

<sup>8</sup> Aug., *pecc. mer.* 2, 6, 7 ; 2, 7, 8; *perf. iust.* 21, 44; *gest. Pel.* 30, 55; Dionys. Exig., *Codex Canonum Ecclesiasticorum* (PL 67, 217B-219C).

<sup>9</sup> G. Bonner, *Augustine and Pelagianism*, in *Augustinian Studies* 24 (1993), 43; G. Bonner, *Anti-Pelagian Works*, in *Augustine Through the Ages*, ed. A. Fitzgerald, 41.

<sup>10</sup> It is impossible to know who first put forth the idea that one may be sinless. But it may have been « an anonymous mass of fairly nondescript Christians at Carthage who espouse certain theological views which are more or less associated with each other depending upon the individual who holds them ». R. Dodaro, *Note on the Carthaginian Debate Over Sinlessness, A.D. 411-412* (*Augustine, Pecc. Mer.* 2.7.8-16.25), in *Augustinianum* 40 (2000), 201.

sin, (2) whether or not there has ever been a person—other than Jesus—who has been sinless, (3) why it is that no human being is sinless, and (4) whether or not someday there will be a person who achieves a state of sinlessness.<sup>11</sup> Although he was responding to Marcellinus' letter, Augustine—in a subtle rhetorical ploy—poses these four questions and establishes the parameters of the debate.

The first question is only briefly discussed. Augustine claims that it is possible for one to remain sinless. This sinlessness may only be achieved, he says, through the grace of God and the movement of the free will. The free will is necessary because God will not force an individual to be sinless. The sinless life must be desired by the individual and only then will God offer His aid.<sup>12</sup> Initially, this may seem to be a surprising claim and that Augustine has agreed with his opponents' arguments. He is making what I will call a "hypothetical" claim regarding sinlessness because, as we will soon see, he does not believe that there have ever been any individuals without sin. If Augustine categorically were to eliminate the possibility of the sinless life, then he would be placing a limitation on God's power. He would never want to do so and, therefore, allows this hypothetical possibility of God's intervention in the life of an individual.

Historically, as he makes clear in his second point, there has never been a single individual who has achieved such a state.<sup>13</sup> He refutes his opponents by quoting a variety of biblical passages (*Ps.* 143, 2; 32, 5-6; *1 Io.* 1, 8) and alludes to several others (*Apoc.* 14, 3-5; *Prov.* 18, 17) that prove this impossibility.

In his third point, Augustine states that there has never been a sinless individual because there has never been anyone who truly wanted to be without sin. When one is assured that something is good then one will desire it. This knowledge of goodness, however, is due to the grace of God. At other times, one does not understand the goodness of a deed or take delight in it; it is at these moments that pride leads the individual to sin.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Aug., *pecc. mer.* 2, 6, 7; 2, 7, 8-16. 25; 2, 17, 26 – 2, 19, 33; 2, 2034-36.

<sup>12</sup> Aug., *pecc. mer.* 2, 6, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Aug., *pecc. mer.* 2, 7, 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, 2, 17, 26; 2, 17, 27.

Augustine then poses his fourth question: will there ever be anyone in the future who will be free of sin?<sup>15</sup> Despite his earlier claim that it is hypothetically possible for one to be without sin, he claims this will never happen.<sup>16</sup> Returning to an argument from Book I, he links the impossibility of a sinless life to his discussion about the necessity of baptism in infants because of original sin.<sup>17</sup> For, even if one is able to live a life in adulthood free of sin, through grace and the pure desire of the free will, one is still born corrupted.

## 2.2 *de spiritu et littera*.

Augustine's second treatise relevant for our topic, *De spiritu et littera*, written at the end of 412 or at the beginning of 413, was an expansion of his claim in Book II of *De peccatorum meritis et remissione et De baptismo parvulorum*. Marcellinus read Augustine's initial response and was perplexed by his position that, in theory, one may live a life without sinning. He felt that it was absurd to claim that one may achieve such a goal and, at the same time, not be able to prove anyone has ever done so in the past. In response, Augustine points to several verses in the Bible (*Mt.* 19, 24; *Mc.* 10, 25; *Lc.* 18, 25) that show that something has been claimed as a possibility without there ever having been an historical case.<sup>18</sup>

While we do not see evidence in this text that Augustine has yet changed his thinking about sinlessness, it is still important for us because scholars have often misunderstood its purpose. Paul Meyer, for example, has argued that *De spiritu et littera* should not be listed among the corpus of writings against Pelagius; rather, it simply should be read for a greater understanding of his exegesis of Paul.<sup>19</sup> Jean Chéné, likewise, has shelved Augustine's concern for sinlessness and analyzed *De spiritu et littera* to determine if Augustine made

---

<sup>15</sup> Aug., *pecc. mer.* 2, 20, 34.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, 2, 20, 34.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, 1, 9, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Aug., *spir. et litt.* 1, 1.

<sup>19</sup> P. W. Meyer, *Augustine's The Spirit and the Letter as a Reading of Paul's Romans*, in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, ed. L. M. White - O. L. Yarbrough, Minneapolis 1995, 368.

an argument for the universal salvific will of God.<sup>20</sup> Chéné, at least, is willing to acknowledge that it was written against Pelagius and those who claimed the possibility of a sinless life. But it seems that Meyer, Chéné, and other scholars<sup>21</sup> who only read this text for Augustine's definition of grace miss the point of *De spiritu et littera*. Although Augustine spends most of his time defining how one should correctly understand grace, he does so to explain how one may be sinless. Grace—which is bookended by a discussion of sinlessness (1, 1-2. 3 and 35, 62-66) and should be seen as framing the entire text—is the means to the end of sinlessness. Debate about the sinless life, then, caused Augustine's composition on grace. This text certainly should be included among the corpus of writings against the Pelagians.

### 2.3 *de natura et gratia*.

At the end of 414,<sup>22</sup> Augustine received a copy of Pelagius' *De natura*—written around 405-406<sup>23</sup>—from two men, Timasius and James, who had been admirers of Pelagius. They had grown suspicious of his emphasis on the undefiled goodness of human nature and had written to Augustine stating that Augustine's words had swayed their opinions. Although *De natura* is no longer extant *in toto*, it is clear from the remaining fragments that its main focus concerns the possible sinlessness of humanity.<sup>24</sup> It was Augustine's reply, *De natura et gratia* (written towards the end of the spring of 415),<sup>25</sup> that signaled an important shift in his understanding of the arguments of his opponents, and displayed a more urgent tone in his rhetoric. But, he was still hesitant to condemn Pelagius openly

---

<sup>20</sup> Cf. J. Chéné, *Saint Augustin enseigne-t-il dans le De spiritu et littera l'universalité de la volonté salvifique de Dieu?*, in *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 47 (1959), 223.

<sup>21</sup> G. Bonner, *Spiritu et littera, De*, in *Augustine Through the Ages*, ed. A. Fitzgerald, 815-816.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. S. Lancel, *Saint Augustine*, London 2002, 333.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Y. M. Duval, *La Date du De Natura de Pélagé: Les Premières Étapes de la Controverse sur la Nature de la Grâce*, in *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 36 (1990), 283.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. W. A. Löhr, *Pelagius' Schrift De natura: Rekonstruktion und Analyse*, in *Recherches augustiniennes* 31 (1999), 235-294.

<sup>25</sup> S. Lancel, *Saint Augustine*, 333.

because he hoped that Pelagius would recant his views—an unfounded thought, because Pelagius never hinted that he was open to persuasion. Brown argues that Augustine hesitated to mention Pelagius by name because of the powerful patrons who supported Pelagius, but Augustine has shown this optimism in the past.<sup>26</sup> When one compares the treatises that he wrote against Pelagius and the Donatists, one sees, at the beginning, the same desire that they will come to agree with his position; but he would become frustrated and bitter by their resolve. By the end of his life, Augustine's aggravation with Pelagius had spilled over to Julian of Eclanum.<sup>27</sup>

*De natura et gratia* is of interest because we see a shift in Augustine's thinking about the Virgin Mary. Gerald Bonner offers the standard scholarly view:

« Augustine, it will be noticed, is careful in his affirmation of universal human sinlessness to give Mary a place apart. It is not so much that he declares her personal sinlessness, as that he absolutely refuses to discuss the matter *propter honorem Domini*, for the honour of the Lord. This specific reference to the Mother of God—and the total number of such references is not very large in the great bulk of Augustine's writings—is evidence of the particular place which Mary enjoyed in the eyes of Christians by the beginning of the fifth century, not only in the Greek east but in the traditionally conservative Latin west ».<sup>28</sup>

Augustine, in the passage to which Bonner alludes, says that one should « leave aside the holy Virgin Mary; on account of the honor due to the Lord, I do not want to raise here any question about her when we are dealing with sins. After all, how do we know what wealth of grace was given to her in order to conquer sin completely, since she merited to conceive and bear the one who certainly had no sin? »<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> P. Brown, *The Patrons of Pelagius: The Roman Aristocracy between East and West*, in *Religion and Society in the Age of Saint Augustine*, New York 1972, 217.

<sup>27</sup> Aug., *c. Iul. imp.* 2, 44; 2, 206; 4, 56.

<sup>28</sup> G. Bonner, *St. Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies*, 328.

<sup>29</sup> Aug., *nat. et gr.* 36, 42.



Bonner, Pelikan, Ferguson, and Doyle agree that Augustine said that Mary was sinless.<sup>30</sup> These scholars, however, ignore a previous discussion, from Book II of *De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum*, where a different understanding of Mary's status is given.

Therefore (Augustine says), he [Jesus] alone, having become man, while remaining God, never had any sin and did not assume sinful flesh, though he assumed flesh from the sinful flesh of his mother [*de materna carne peccati*]. Whatever of the flesh he took from her, he either cleansed it to assume it or cleansed it by assuming.<sup>31</sup>

We can see here that there is a shift, over just a few years, from certainty to doubt about Mary's sinfulness.<sup>32</sup>

It is impossible to know for sure what caused Augustine's thought to change, but a few points should be made. In *De natura*, Pelagius offered a long list of men and women from the Old and New Testaments whom he believed to be sinless; among others, he mentioned the Virgin Mary, which seems to have forced Augustine to take a closer look at his own thinking.<sup>33</sup> Augustine surely did not want to concede this point to Pelagius because he might be seen as associating himself with Pelagius. At the same time, he did not want to slander Mary. His only option would be quietly to avoid it. It is surprising that Pelagius allowed Augustine to do so and how rarely Mary is mentioned at all in this debate, as one would expect Pelagius often to refer to Mary as *the* exemplar of sinlessness. But, he does not. Rather, Pelagius spent more time discussing other biblical

---

<sup>30</sup> G. Bonner, *St. Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies* 328, note 1; J. Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries* 33; 191; 195; J. Ferguson, *Pelagius: A Historical and Theological Study*, 166; D. Doyle, *Mary, Mother of God, in Augustine through the Ages*, ed. A. Fitzgerald, 544.

<sup>31</sup> *solus ergo ille etiam homo factus manens deus peccatum nullum umquam habuit nec sumpsit carnem peccati quamvis de materna carne peccati. quod enim carnis inde suscepit, id profecto aut suscipiendum mundavit aut suscipiendo mundavit.* Aug., *pecc. mer.* 2, 24, 38.

<sup>32</sup> Augustine is not clear when exactly the flesh of Mary was cleansed. This issue would later haunt the medieval theologians. For example, see Io. Duns Scotus, *Quaestiones disputatae de immaculata conceptione Mariae virginis* 2, 1-2.

<sup>33</sup> « Piety demands, he [Pelagius] says, that we admit that she [Mary] was without sin ». Aug., *nat. et gr.* 36, 42.

figures such as Job or Elizabeth.<sup>34</sup> Augustine must have been relieved that he was not pressured by Pelagius to commit himself to an answer. While we must not project on the fifth century our modern understanding of Mary's Immaculate Conception and sinless life, the rare appearance of Mary in this debate is perplexing.

#### 2.4 *de perfectione iustitiae hominis*.

Augustine received a text titled *Liber definitionum*<sup>35</sup> from two bishops, Eutropius and Paul, who asked him to respond to it because they were worried that it was being spread throughout Sicily.<sup>36</sup> His response, *De perfectione iustitiae hominis*, roughly can be dated between 412 and 418, although it was probably written around 416.<sup>37</sup> The majority of the citations from Caelestius are directly related to our topic, which show his theological preoccupation.

Two features deserve our attention: first, earlier in this article, we saw that Augustine believed that, although it is hypothetically possible to achieve a state of sinlessness, in reality this historically has never been achieved. At the end of *De perfectione iustitiae hominis*, however, Augustine changes his mind:

Finally, one might claim that, apart from our head, the savior of his body, there have been or are some righteous human beings [*aliqui homines iusti*] without any sin [*sine aliquo peccato*], either because they never consented to its desires or because we should not consider as a sin something so slight that God does not count it against their

---

<sup>34</sup> Aug., *pecc. mer.* 2, 10, 14-15. 22.

<sup>35</sup> Honnay argues that Augustine did not believe that Caelestius actually wrote this text. G. Honnay, *Caelestius, Discipulus Pelagii*, in *Augustiniana* 44 (1994), 281. I would argue, however, that the first paragraph of *Perf. iust.* suggests that Augustine believed that either Caelestius or his followers wrote it.

<sup>36</sup> Aug., *perf. iust.* 1.

<sup>37</sup> Bonner keeps open the possibility of the text being written as early as 412, while Teske places it at 415, as does Rackett. G. Bonner, *Perfectione iustitiae hominis*, *De*, in *Augustine through the Ages*, ed. A. Fitzgerald 646; R. Teske, *Introduction*, in *Answer to the Pelagians*, 269; M. Rackett, *Sexuality and Sinlessness: The Diversity among Pelagian Theologies of Marriage and Virginity*, 278. I would suggest that it was written after Augustine had met Orosius returning from Palestine, and received letters from Jerome, Heroes, Lazarus, and Jerome's *Dialogi*.

holiness. In any case, I do not believe that one should resist this idea too much.<sup>38</sup>

Note the shift of focus to allow the possibility of a sinless individual, which calls for a few comments. It is clear that Augustine does not have the Virgin Mary in mind because he uses the plural (*homines*), not the singular (*homo*).<sup>39</sup> He probably was thinking about some of the figures from the Old and New Testaments (Noah, Daniel, Job, Zechariah, Elizabeth), but Augustine did not want to mention them by name.<sup>40</sup> It is also not a coincidence that Augustine made this claim at the very end of the text while summarizing his argument because this allowed him to avoid expanding this argument. Although he hesitated to defend this new argument with any force, it should not be seen as simply an aberration but as a genuine change of heart.<sup>41</sup>

The second important point comes from the lines shortly after this quotation: « for I know, » Augustine says « that such is the view of some whose position on this matter I dare not reprehend, though I cannot defend it either ».<sup>42</sup> Teske has argued that Augustine was thinking of Ambrose,<sup>43</sup> but I want to suggest that he is referring to Jerome, who claimed that one may be sinless for a short time.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> *postremo, si excepto illo capite nostro, sui corporis saluatore, asseruntur uel fuisse in hac uita uel esse aliqui homines iusti sine aliquo peccato, siue numquam consentiendo desideriis eius sive quia pro nullo peccato habendum est, quod tantum est, ut hoc pietati non imputet deus—quamuis aliter sit beatus sine peccato, aliter autem beatus cui non imputat dominus peccatum—non nimis existimo reluctandum. Aug., perf. iust. 21, 44.*

<sup>39</sup> While Mary is not mentioned by name, we should not necessarily include her just because she wasn't explicitly excluded.

<sup>40</sup> These people previously had been discussed as possible examples of sinlessness. Cf. Aug., *pecc. mer.* 2, 10. 12-16. 24.

<sup>41</sup> Aug., *perf. iust.* 21, 44. It is unclear exactly what caused this change of heart. It could have occurred because of the change in circumstances in the debate or the context of the situation.

<sup>42</sup> *scio enim quibusdam esse uisum, quorum de hac re rententiam non audeo reprehendere, quamquam nec defendere ualeam. Ibidem.*

<sup>43</sup> Cf. R. Teske, in *Letters: 156-210 (Epistulae)*, ed. B. Ramsey, Hyde Park (NY) 2004 (*The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century. Part 2: Letters 3*), 18, note 3.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Hier., *adv. Pelag.* 3, 12.

Shortly before Augustine wrote this text, Paul Orosius returned to Hippo from Palestine. He had brought with him, among other things, a letter (172) from Jerome and a copy of the *Dialogi contra Pelagianos*.<sup>45</sup> At first glance, this letter seems to praise Augustine, something that is a dramatic turn from their previous correspondence that displayed Jerome's suspicion of Augustine.<sup>46</sup> Jerome said that Augustine had written several books that «were full of learning and resplendent with every sparkle of eloquence».<sup>47</sup> Jerome, however, is actually criticizing Augustine in this letter because he also says that

[in Augustine's texts can be found] the words of the blessed apostle, 'each person abounds in his own ideas (*Rom.* 14, 5), one in this way, another in that (*1 Cor.* 7, 7).' Certainly whatever could be said and drawn from the sources of holy scriptures by your lofty mind [*ingenium*] you have stated and discussed.<sup>48</sup>

This should be read as a subtle criticism because Jerome believed that Augustine was generating his own ideas about sinlessness and has turned away from the writings of the tradition in favor of his own opinions. This criticism is noteworthy for two reasons. First, Jerome earlier had charged Ambrose with plagiarism because Ambrose relied too heavily on the writings of others when he wrote on virginity.<sup>49</sup> Second, Cassian later would criticize Jerome for abandoning tradition in favor of his own views when he wrote about ascetic practices, a criticism that would have made Jerome furious if he were still alive at the time. Goodrich states that «Jerome, in

<sup>45</sup> Cf. W. H. C. Frend, *Orosius, Paulus, in Augustine Through the Ages*, ed. A. Fitzgerald, 616.

<sup>46</sup> S. Squires, *Jerome's Animosity against Augustine*, in *Augustiniana* 58 (2008), 181-199. For good introductions to this correspondence: F. Cavallera, *Saint Jérôme: sa vie et son oeuvre*, vol. 1, Louvain 1922 (Spicilegium Sacrum Lovaniense. Études et documents 1), 297-306; C. White, *The Correspondence (394-419) Between Jerome and Augustine of Hippo*, Lewiston 1990.

<sup>47</sup> *eruditissimis et omni eloquentiae splendore fulgentibus ad tempus respondere non potui*. Hier., ep. 172, 1.

<sup>48</sup> *sed quia iuxta beatum apostolum unusquisque in suo sensu abundet alius quidem sic alius autem sic. certe quicquid dici potuit et tam sublimi ingenio de scripturarum sanctarum hauriri fontibus, a te positum atque dissertum est. sed quae oro reverentiam tuam, parumper patiaris me tuum laudare ingenium*. Hier., ep. 172, 1.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. N. Adkin, *Ambrose and Jerome: The Opening Shot*, in *Mnemosyne* 46 (1993), 364-376.

particular, is made the target of doubt [by Cassian]. He was a particularly eloquent writer, but his ascetic works were drawn from his own ingenuity [*ingenium*]. His teachings were the product of his fertile mind, rather than the fruit of *experientia* ». <sup>50</sup> Augustine clearly detected Jerome's backhanded compliment because, shortly after receiving this letter, he began to quote authors such as Cyprian, Ambrose, Irenaeus, Hilary, Gregory, and Basil and would rely on tradition throughout his debate with Julian. <sup>51</sup>

This letter is also instructive because Jerome recognizes that he and Augustine think differently about sinlessness. He says that « if enemies, and especially heretics, see differences of opinion between us, they will slander us by saying that they stem from rancor of the heart ». <sup>52</sup> While Augustine and Jerome see themselves as having the same general agenda against Pelagius, both men recognize that they disagree on the question of sinlessness.

### 2.5 *de gestis pelagii*.

The last text from Augustine that is relevant for our purposes, *De gestis Pelagii*, was written in late 417 or early 418. <sup>53</sup> It was a reaction to the Synod of Diospolis that was convened at the end of 415. Two deposed bishops of Gaul, Heros of Arles (a disciple of Martin of Tours) and Lazarus of Aix, accused Pelagius of heresy. They charged him on seven counts from his own writings and also of agreeing with Caelestius, who had been condemned in Carthage. One of these bishops fell ill and could not attend; the other would not appear at the Synod without his colleague. Pelagius was proclaimed orthodox.

This decision by the Synod made Augustine's campaign against Pelagius much more complicated to justify. How was he supposed to

---

<sup>50</sup> R. J. Goodrich, *Contextualizing Cassian: Aristocrats, Asceticism, and Reformation in Fifth-Century Gaul*, Oxford 2007, 71.

<sup>51</sup> Aug., *nupt. et conc.* 2, 29, 52; *c. ep. Pel.* 4, 8, 20-11. 31; *c. Iul.* 1, 3, 5-9. 46. Earlier, Augustine had mentioned some of these authors, but he was responding to Pelagius' claim that his arguments are consistent with tradition. Aug., *nat. et. gr.* 61, 71-67. 81). Augustine did not draw on the tradition until after he read Jerome's letter.

<sup>52</sup> *ceterum aemuli et maxime haeretici, si diuersas inter nos sententias uiderint, de animi calumniabuntur rancore descendere*. Hier., *ep.* 172, 1.

<sup>53</sup> G. Bonner, *Gestis Pelagii, De*, in *Augustine Through the Ages*, ed. A. Fitzgerald, 382.

attack Pelagius's ideas when a group of orthodox bishops found Pelagius to be in harmony with the Church? He claimed that Pelagius purposefully had misled the bishops,<sup>54</sup> and that it was not the fault of the Synod that they did not understand Pelagius' treachery because the bishops did not know Latin.<sup>55</sup> Augustine attempted to walk a thin line between criticizing him while, at the same time, not calling into question the legitimacy of the Synod itself.

Late in this text, Augustine once again returned to the question of sinlessness because he was upset by the fact that the texts of Pelagius neglect any mention of the assistance of God. At the Synod, Pelagius' verbal testimony diverged from what he had written in his texts by adding the phrase « by the grace of God ».<sup>56</sup> Although Augustine's anger at this discrepancy should come as no surprise, his next claim is intriguing. The Synod discussed the statement from Caelestius, which was condemned at the Council of Carthage of 411/12, that before Christ there were human beings without sin.<sup>57</sup> Pelagius distanced himself from this statement. He had stated previously that there were individuals who had been without sin, but now he only said that there were people who were holy and righteous.<sup>58</sup> Augustine says that Pelagius « realized, after all, how dangerous [*periculosus*] and difficult [*molestus*] a point it was [to agree with Caelestius] »<sup>59</sup> since Pelagius knew that Caelestius had been condemned for it. Augustine's mild language—in contrast to his earlier harsh criticisms—is noteworthy; he does not want to use stronger language than *periculosus* and *molestus* because he himself allowed for the possibility of just such a claim and he did not want to sound like a hypocrite.<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Augustine, *Gest. Pel.* 11 (26).

<sup>55</sup> Carole Burnett has pointed to the woefully inadequate case presented against Pelagius: C. Burnett, *Dysfunction at Diospolis: A Comparative Study of Augustine's De gestis Pelagii and Jerome's Dialogus adversus Pelagianos*, in *Augustinian Studies* 34 (2003), 155.

<sup>56</sup> *quod addita est dei gratia*. Aug., *gest. Pel.* 11, 26.

<sup>57</sup> Aug., *gest. Pel.* 11, 23.

<sup>58</sup> Aug., *nat et gr.* 36, 42.

<sup>59</sup> *sensit enim quam esset periculosum et molestum*. Aug., *gest. Pel.* 11, 26.

<sup>60</sup> Aug., *perf. iust.* 21, 44.

But, he is no longer certain of the possibility of a sinless life. In this text, there is yet another shift in his thinking and he now leaves open for debate the question of sinlessness, saying that

it was not ... decided [at Diospolis] whether in this flesh lusting against the spirit there has been, is, or will be someone with the use of reason and the choice of the will, whether in human society or monastic solitude, who will not have to say ... 'forgive us our debts' (Mt. 6:12) ... that is perhaps a question to be peacefully investigated, not among Catholics and heretics, but among Catholics.<sup>61</sup>

We can see that he now abandons his previous position from *De perfectione iustitiae hominis*,<sup>62</sup> but does not yet want to commit himself to the opposite. The shift in Augustine's thought from *De perfectione iustitiae hominis* to *De gestis Pelagii*, I would suggest, was caused by the indecision at Diospolis. Augustine recognized that his acknowledgement of possibility of the sinless life cannot ultimately be sustained, and the hesitancy of Diospolis persuaded him of this.

### 3. *The council of Carthage of 418.*

The final piece of our discussion comes from the Council of Carthage of 418. We know very little about this Council, but we do have nine canons from it—four are important for our purposes. Although these canons cannot be attributed solely to Augustine, he surely played an important role in the Council that was held on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May<sup>63</sup> with over 200 African bishops in attendance.<sup>64</sup> Shortly thereafter, probably on the 28th of June,<sup>65</sup> Pope Zosimus sent a

---

<sup>61</sup> *an uero tunc perficiatur hoc donum, quando similes ei erimus, quando uidebimus eum sicuti est, quando dicitur non a pugnantibus: uideo aliam legem in membris meis repugnantem legi mentis meae, sed a triumphantibus: ubi est, mors, uictoria tua? ubi est, mors, aculeus tuus? quod non inter catholicos et haereticos, sed inter ipsos catholicos fortasse pacifice requirendum est.* Aug., *gest. Pel.* 30, 55. I have changed the punctuation of the English translation to make Augustine's words clearer.

<sup>62</sup> Aug., *perf. iust.* 21, 44.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. J. Merdinger, *Councils of North African Bishops*, in *Augustine Through the Ages*, ed. A. Fitzgerald, 249.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. J. Ferguson, *Pelagius: A Historical and Theological Study*, 111.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. R. Teske, *Introduction*, in *Answer to the Pelagians*, 377.

response, his *Epistula Tractoria*, condemning Caelestius and Pelagius.<sup>66</sup>

Canons six through nine are important for us because, while Augustine had recently claimed that sinlessness is « perhaps a question to be peacefully investigated », <sup>67</sup> the Council of Carthage closed the investigation by claiming that it is impossible for anyone to be sinless, including those who are considered “holy persons:”

*Canon Six:* They [the bishops at the Council] likewise decreed that, if any say that we are given the grace of justification so that we can more easily (*facile*) do by grace what we are commanded to do by free choice, as though if grace were not given, we could still fulfill the divine commandments without it, though not easily (*facile*), let them be anathema.

*Canon Seven:* They likewise decreed that, if any think that the statement of Saint John, the apostle, ‘if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us (1 Jo. 1, 8),’ is to be interpreted in the sense that one should say that we have no sin on account of humility, not because it is the truth, let them be anathema.

*Canon Eight:* They likewise decreed that, if any say that in the Lord’s Prayer holy persons say, ‘forgive us our debts’ (*Mt.* 6, 12), so that they do not say this for themselves, because this petition is no longer necessary for them, but for others who are sinners in their people, and that in this way every holy person does not say, ‘forgive me my debts,’ but ‘forgive us our debts,’ so that the righteous are understood to say this for others rather than for themselves, let them be anathema.

*Canon Nine:* They likewise decreed that, if any claim that the words of the Lord’s Prayer where we say, ‘forgive us our debts’ (*Mt.* 6, 12), are said by holy persons in the sense that they say them humbly and not truthfully, let them be anathema.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Cf. S. Lancel, *Saint Augustine*, 339.

<sup>67</sup> *quod non inter catholicos et haereticos, sed inter ipsos catholicos fortasse pacifice requirendum est.* Aug., *gest. Pel.* 30, 55.

<sup>68</sup> 6. *Item placuit ut quicumque dixerit ideo nobis gratiam justificationis dari, ut quid facere libero iubemur arbitrio, facilius possimus implere per gratiam, tanquam et si gratia non daretur, non quidem facile, sed tamen possimus etiam sine illa implere divina mandata, anathema sit. De fructibus enim mandatorum Dominus loquebatur,*



The discrepancy between Augustine's hesitancy to make any claims for the possibility of sinlessness at the end of *De gestis Pelagii* and these four canons prompts many questions.

What caused the Council to be called? I argue that Augustine was the main figure who organized the Council to condemn the theology of Pelagius. Augustine's frustration at the way that the Synod of Diospolis had failed to censure the writings of Pelagius (not to mention the attack on Augustine's character at the Synod of

---

*ubi non ait, Sine me difficilius potestis facere: sed ait, Sine me nihil potestis facere. 7. Item placuit, quod ait sanctus Joannes apostolus: Si dixerimus quia peccatum non habemus, nos ipsos decipimus, et veritas in nobis non est, quisquis sic accipiendum putaverit, ut dicat, propter humilitatem oportere dici nos non habere peccatum, non quia vere ita est, anathema sit. Sequitur enim apostolus, et adjungit: Si autem confessi fuerimus peccata nostra, fidelis est et justus, qui remittat nobis peccata, et mundet nos ab omni iniquitate. Ubi satis apparet hoc non tantum humiliter, sed etiam veraciter dici. Poterat enim Apostolus dicere: Si dixerimus, non habemus peccatum, nos ipsos extollimus, et humilitas in nobis non est: sed cum ait, nos ipsos decipimus, et veritas in nobis non est, satis ostendit eum qui dixerit se non habere peccatum non verum loqui, sed falsum. 8. Item placuit ut quicumque dixerit in oratione Dominica ideo dicere sanctos, Dimitte nobis debita nostra, ut non pro seipsis hoc dicant, quia non est eis jam necessaria ista petitio, sed pro aliis, qui sunt in suo populo peccatores, et ideo non dicere unumquemque sanctorum, Dimitte mihi debita mea, sed, Dimitte nobis debita nostra, ut hoc pro aliis potius quam pro se justus petere intelligatur, anathema sit. Sanctus enim justus erat apostolus Jacobus, cum dicebat: In multis enim offendimus omnes. Nam quare additum est, omnes, nisi ut ista sententia conveniret et psalmo, ubi legitur: Ne intres in iudicio cum servo tuo, quoniam non justificabitur in conspectu tuo omnis vivens; et in oratione sapientissimi Salomonis: Non est homo qui non peccavit et in libro sancti Job; In manu omnis hominis signat, ut sciat omnis homo infirmitatem suam. Unde etiam Daniel Sanctus et justus, cum in oratione pluraliter diceret: Peccavimus, iniquitatem fecimus, et caetera, quae ibi veraciter et humiliter confitentur: ne putaretur, quemadmodum quidam sentiunt, hoc non de suis, sed populi sui potius dixisse peccatis, postea dixit: Cum orarem, et confiterer peccata mea, et peccata populi mei Domino Deo meo, noluit dicere peccata nostra, sed peccata populi sui dixit, et sua: quoniam futuros istos, qui tam male intelligerent, tamquam Propheta, praevidit. 9. Item placuit ut quicumque ipsa verba Dominicae orationis, ubi dicimus, Dimitte nobis debita nostra, ita volunt a sanctis dici, ut humiliter, non veraciter hoc dicatur, anathema sit. Quis enim ferat orantem, et hominibus, sed ipsi Domino mentientem, qui labiis sibi dicit dimitti velle, et corde dicit, quae sibi dimittantur, debita non habere? Dionys. Exig., Codex Canonum Ecclesiasticorum (PL 67, 217B-219C).*

Jerusalem)<sup>69</sup> was too much for him to swallow; he had to take matters into his own hands. Augustine's central role in this Council may seem obvious, but we should keep in mind that Augustine had no hand in the Council of Carthage of 411/12 that dealt with Caelestius.<sup>70</sup> His leadership role, then, should not be assumed.

Two examples from these Canons point to Augustine's fingerprints on this Council. The first is from the discussion in Canon Six which addresses how "easily" (*facile*) one may keep God's commandments. This brings to mind Augustine's recent response found in *De gestis Pelagii*. After having received a letter from Pelagius about Diospolis, and having received the minutes of it from Cyril of Alexandria,<sup>71</sup> Augustine noticed an important difference between the two: in the first Pelagius used the word "easily" (*facile*), while in the second he did not.<sup>72</sup> This discrepancy was a sign to Augustine of Pelagius' heresy as well as his willful subversion of the Synod.<sup>73</sup> Second, the quotation of *1 Io.* 1, 8 in Canon Seven reflects a biblical quotation that was constantly discussed throughout Augustine's writings.<sup>74</sup> The presence of these two examples cannot be coincidental and must be seen as stemming directly from Augustine. It is also clear that Augustine was behind the Council because, of the 200 bishops in attendance, only he and 14 other bishops remained in Carthage after the Council waiting for the response of the Pope.<sup>75</sup>

Did the other bishops need to convince him of the impossibility of a sinless life, or did Augustine come to this conclusion on his own? We saw earlier that Augustine had reconsidered his understanding of Mary based on the writings of Pelagius and his indecision on the sinlessness because of Diospolis. Here, however, Augustine did not return to his original point through any outside

---

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Oros., *apol.* 4 (PL 31, 1173D-1213).

<sup>70</sup> For an excellent discussion of Caelestius and the Council of Carthage 411/12, see O. Wermelinger, *Rom und Pelagius*, Stuttgart 1975, 4-28.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. Aug., *ep.* 4\*, 2.

<sup>72</sup> Aug., *gest. Pel.* 30, 54.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. R. F. Evans, 'Pelagius' Veracity at the Synod of Diospolis, in *Studies in Medieval Culture*, ed. J. R. Sommerfeldt, Kalamazoo 1964, 21-30.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Aug., *pecc. mer.* 2, 7, 8; 2, 8, 10; 2, 10, 12; 2, 13, 18; *spir. et litt.* 36, 65; *nat. et gr.* 14, 15; 34, 38; 36, 42; 62, 73; *perf. iust.* 18, 39; 21, 44; *gest. Pel.* 11, 26; 12, 27.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. S. Lancel, *Saint Augustine*, 339.

influence. Canons Eight and Nine give us a glimpse into Augustine's thinking. In the paragraph from *De gestis Pelagii* where he claims that the question of historical sinlessness is open to investigation, Augustine quoted *Mt. 6, 12* (as we earlier saw) saying that « it was not, nonetheless, decided ... whether in human society or in monastic solitude, who will not have to say, not because of others, but because of himself, 'Forgive us our debts' ». <sup>76</sup> Both Canons Eight and Nine, however, use *Mt. 6, 12* to claim definitively that there never has been, is, or will be anyone without sin. At some point between 416 and 418, therefore, Augustine's appreciation of this passage from the Lord's Prayer grew and it must have been one of the key factors that convinced him of the impossibility of the sinless life. <sup>77</sup> The importance of this verse can also be seen later in his refutation against Julian's claims of sinlessness. <sup>78</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion.

We have seen in this article that Augustine's understanding of the question of sinlessness changed as years passed and he slowly began

---

<sup>76</sup> *quod etiam sua sententia declararunt dicentes eum recte respondisse hominem cum adiutorio dei et gratia posse esse sine peccato, quid aliud metuentes, nisi ne hoc negando non possibilitati hominis, sed ipsi dei gratiae facere uiderentur iniuriam? nec tamen definitum est, quando fiat homo sine peccato, quod fieri posse adiuuante dei gratia iudicatum est, non est, inquam, definitum, utrum in hac carne concupiscente aduersus spiritum fuerit uel sit uel futurus sit aliquis iam ratione utens et uoluntatis arbitrio, siue in ista frequentia hominum siue in solitudine monachorum, cui non sit iam necessarium non propter alios, sed etiam propter se ipsum dicere in oratione: dimitte nobis debita nostra. Aug., gest. Pel. 30, 55. This passage from the *Pater Noster* was also crucial to Cassian's understanding of prayer, which is at the heart of his critique of Pelagius. Cf. Cassian., *Conl.* 9, 18-24.*

<sup>77</sup> This argument is similar to one made by scholars, such as Paula Fredriksen, who claim that Augustine had changed his mind about the relationship between grace and free will around 396/97 because of a new assessment of the letters and life of Paul. Prior to this new assessment, in his *De libero arbitrio*, Augustine believed that the free will is unencumbered, while after this new assessment, (which changed as he wrote *ad Simplicianum*), Augustine believed that the will is impeded by the sin of Adam. P. Fredriksen, *Beyond the Body/Soul Dichotomy: Augustine on Paul against the Manichees and the Pelagians*, in *Recherches Augustiniennes* 23 (1988), 102-105.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Aug., *c. ep. Pel.* 1, 14, 28; 4, 10, 27; *c. Iul.* 2, 8, 23; 4, 3, 28; 4, 3, 29.

to see the gravity of the claims that Pelagius, Caelestius, and others were making. Originally, he did not see that the question was one even to be taken seriously, even though Caelestius had been condemned at the Council of Carthage of 411/12 for saying that there were human beings before Christ who were sinless. We also saw that Augustine claimed that hypothetically one may be sinless because to say otherwise would limit the power of God. Despite this hypothetical possibility, Augustine originally claimed that there has never been anyone sinless and that there never will be anyone sinless. Even those men and women from the Old and New Testaments—such as Job, Noah, and Daniel—were certainly righteous individuals and exemplary compared to other humans, but they were not entirely sinless. Later, in *De perfectione iustitiae hominis*, he changed his mind to allow that there have been persons from the past who were sinless. In his next text, *De gestis Pelagii*, he is unsure if there has ever been anyone who was without sin and that this question is open for consideration. Then, he and the Council of Carthage of 418 say that sinlessness is an impossible state to achieve; anyone who claims the opposite is anathema.<sup>79</sup>

STUART SQUIRES  
Brescia University  
1703 Thompson #C  
Owensboro, KY 42301 (USA)  
squires3@yahoo.com

#### ABSTRACT

This article explores Augustine's response to the Pelagians who claimed that if one truly desired to be sinless, one could be. The standard scholarly view, as articulated by Gerald Bonner, was that Augustine's thought during the Pelagian controversy did not change over time. However, Augustine's thoughts on sinlessness changed over a very brief period of time. He initially admits the possibility that, through grace, some may not have sinned (in *De peccatorum meritis et remissione et De baptismo parvulorum*); he later retracts this view (in *De perfectione iustitiae hominis*), only to assert in *De gestis Pelagii* that he is unsure. Finally, he returns to his original position (citing the canons of the Council of Carthage of 418, and arguing that all have sinned).

---

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Aug., *pecc. mer.* 2, 6, 7; 2, 7, 8; 2, 20, 34; 2, 10, 12-14; 21; *gest. Pel.* 11, 23; 30, 54; *perf. iust.* 21; 44; Dionys. Exig., *Codex Canonum Ecclesiasticorum* (PL 67, 217B-219C).