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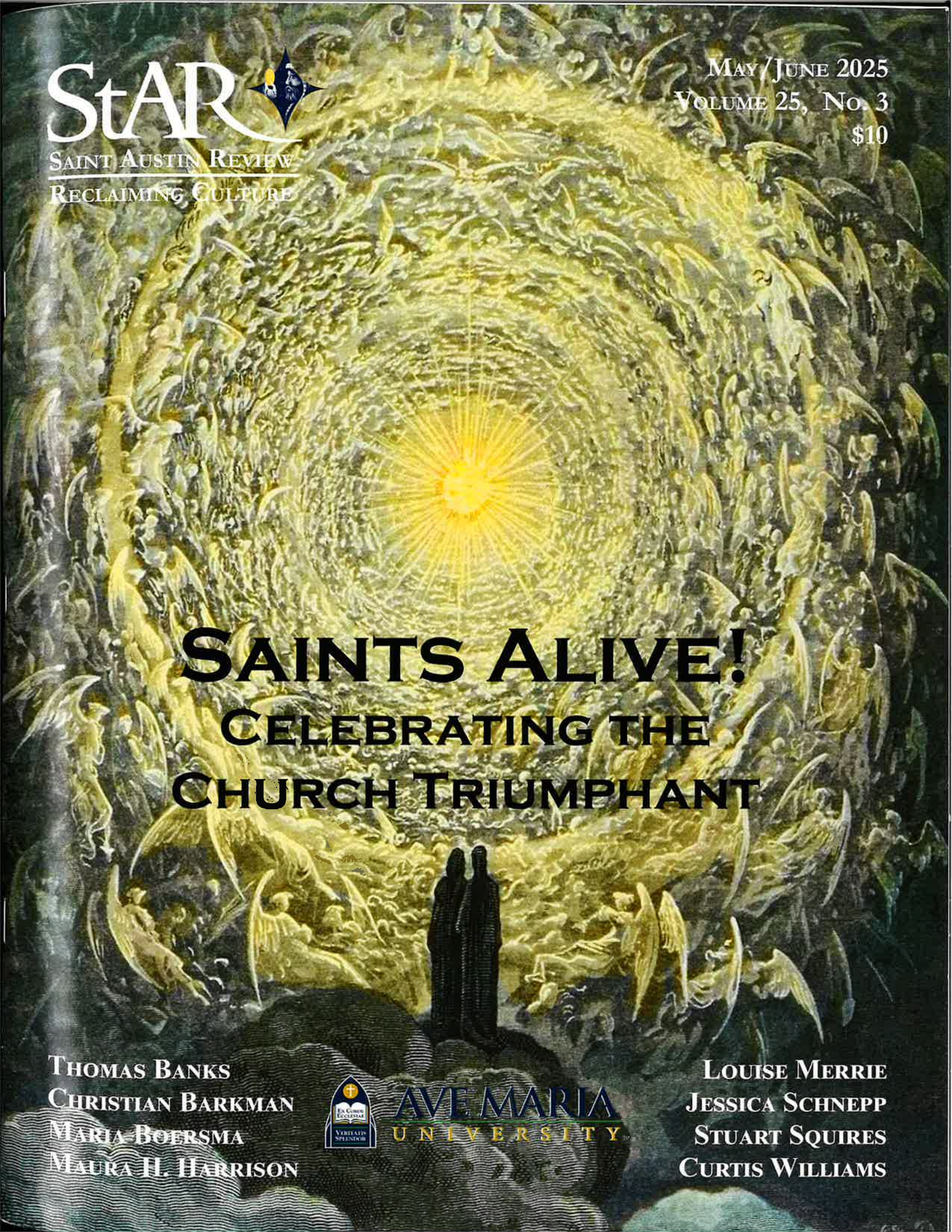

Saints Alive!
Celebrating the Church Triumphant

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AVE MARIA UNIVERSITY

Neil Watson, Director of Marketing
staustin@avemaria.edu

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Stuart Squires

Four Ways St. Augustine Can Help Us Rethink Ministry and Evangelization Today

As Christians, we are called to hand on the faith to the next generation and to make disciples of all nations. St. Augustine, the great North African Church Father, offers us a model for how Catholics today should think differently about ministry and evangelization.

Mentorship

Throughout his life, Augustine acted as a mentor in a variety of ways to many men. Alypius, whom Augustine knew from their hometown, Thagaste, is often described as Augustine's friend, but Augustine also was clearly his mentor early in their association. Alypius came from a prominent family. Drawn to Augustine for seeming to be good and cultured, he was younger than Augustine, and had been his student when Augustine had taught in Thagaste and when he taught in Carthage.

Augustine's influence extended to many of the most important decisions of Alypius' life. While still Augustine's student, Alypius had become obsessed with the circus games that he had found when moving to the big city. One day when expounding on a text in class, Augustine used the circus games as an illustration to drive home a point he wanted to make. Augustine made a snide comment about those who were addicted to the games, and Alypius took his comment to heart and used it as an opportunity to reform his behavior.[1]

He then influenced Alypius to join him as a Manichaean. For nine years, Augustine had been attracted to the Manichaeans for their seemingly rational theodicy.[2] Alypius, who, with his legal mind, never became the philosopher that Augustine did, was attracted more to the Manichean moral virtue.[3] He was drawn to their continence because he had had an upsetting sexual experience early in his life and had concluded that a flourishing life would entail abstinence from sex and marriage. He even tried to convince Augustine to join him in chastity and to live together in a life devoted to *otium*, a life of philosophical leisure.[4] Unsuccessful at his persuasion, Augustine convinced him of the superiority of sex and marriage with the power of his rhetorical skill. Filled with curiosity, Alypius "used to say that he wanted to know what it was without which my life, which met with his approval, would have seemed to me not life but torture".[5]

Not long after, Augustine flipped the script in the famous garden scene when Augustine's moral crisis came to a head and he resolved to live a life of chastity and continence granted by God; Alypius too, Augustine tells us almost as an afterthought, resolved to live chastely.[6] Most importantly, of course, Alypius was influenced by Augustine to be baptized at the hands of Ambrose of Milan in 387.[7]

Catholics today should imitate this one-on-one style of a mentor/mentee relationship if we want to hand on the Truth, Beauty, and Goodness of the Gospel in an attractive manner to the next generation. This may sound like an obvious and easy argument, but over the recent decades our chosen form of ministering and evangelizing has become programmatic. Ministry, unfortunately, has been relegated to the purview of CCD programs, K-12 Catholic school theology classes, OCIA programs, Pre-Cana programs, and Bible studies. Although these types of programs can be helpful tools to assist in ministry and evangelization and should not be eradicated, they have replaced the person-to-person way of passing on the faith (especially in the home) that was the foundational means for centuries.

Ministering and Evangelizing to Educated and Popular Audiences

Augustine is one of the greatest intellects in history. His theological, political, and hermeneutical writings (among others) all have shaped the development of thought in the West. When writing, Augustine's texts were intended for an educated audience, either educated in the liberal arts, Scripture, or both. His audience was almost exclusively men and of significant financial and social standing. In these texts, the North African demonstrated his vast memory, his ability to think creatively, and his persuasive rhetorical skills.

Less appreciated today are his popular sermons, of which we have eleven volumes translated into English. His style when preaching as a bishop was different from his style as an author, which was dictated by the fact that his audiences were very different. When expounding on Scripture in public, his listeners constituted every point on the social spectrum. They were both men and women, rich and poor, educated and illiterate, young and old, and of different social classes. When addressing them, he spoke in a fashion that was comprehensible to everyone.[8] For example, in his sermons he would use common or daily imagery to help explain a point he was trying to make; he also used fictionalized dialogues to help illustrate to his listeners the differences in theological arguments between himself and his opponents.

Augustine is instructive for us because, in a hostile age that insists that Christians ignorantly reject reason and science, Augustine can be a guide who shows that we are a people of faith but also a people of the mind. At the same time, he can be a guide who helps us speak plainly yet convincingly to those who do not place intellectual questions at the center of their

lives. Augustine, in short, can be a model for us of how to speak to an educated audience in a way that resonates with them on the one hand, and how to speak in an accessible way to all people on the other hand.

Conversions of Our Intellect and Will

Augustine's crisis in the garden is often considered to be the second most important conversion experience in Christian history—second only to St. Paul's dramatic moment on the road to Damascus. Down through the centuries, Augustine's tear-filled anguish has left countless readers shedding their own tears as they catch glimpses of themselves in his struggle. Even in his own time, Augustine recognized the power of it to move his readers.[9] It is, without question, one of the most moving scenes in all of Western letters.

Although I, too, have had my life reoriented because of this scene, I would argue that the common interpretation of this dramatic moment is misunderstood by most readers. This common misunderstanding holds that prior to the garden, Augustine was not a Catholic but, by the end of that evening, he had converted to believe in the Catholic Church. What happened that night was not a conversion to Catholicism. If Augustine's entire story from beginning to end were taken into account, we would see two parallel journeys—an intellectual journey and a journey of the will. In the preceding years, he slowly began to believe in the Church's teachings. Concurrently, as a philosopher of his time, he understood that a reordering of the intellect was not sufficient; he also needed a *metanoia* in his moral life. The moment in the garden was not a sudden conversion to Catholicism, but was one step in the slow process of integrating his intellect and will so that they were in harmony and rightly ordered toward their proper ends. Only then could he be baptized by St. Ambrose in Milan about nine months later and became Catholic.

By the time he had his crisis in the garden, Augustine already had given himself intellectually over to the Catholic Church after many of years of wandering.[10] As a boy, he had been a believing catechumen.[11] While a teenager, he read Cicero's *Hortentius* that lit a fire in him to search for Truth.[12] His newfound love of words and ideas forced him to reassess his understanding of the Christian Bible; rejecting it as vulgar, he said that the Scriptures were "unworthy in comparison with the dignity of Cicero".[13] For nine years in his third decade of life he was a Manichaean *auditor*, concluding that their theodicy was the final answer to his most pressing question.[14] He also dabbled in astrology, finding comfort in the determinism of the stars before being convinced it was nonsense.[15] Ultimately dissatisfied with Manichaean cosmology and anthropology, he concluded in his early thirties that Truth is ultimately impossible to know, finding refuge among the Skeptics.[16]

Slowly, his mind began to turn back to the Catholic Church.[17] In Milan, Ambrose's preaching and example made Augustine realize that his earlier understanding of the teachings of the Church was wrong.[18] He realized that instead of mocking Christianity as he had done for years, he should have investigated its mysteries.[19]He was not yet ready to fully assent, but he began to prefer The Way over other philosophies.[20] Although he was certain that God existed and cared for his creation, "little by little",[21] he tells us, Augustine's faith grew stronger, though sometimes weaker.[22] Augustine then read books of the Neoplatonists where he encountered flashes of the Truth articulated in a philosophical register.[23] Now understanding that Christian claims are not opposed to the intellect, he voraciously began to read Paul's letters and other biblical texts.[24] When not occupied with his professional responsibilities, he would spend as much time as he could in the local church.[25] He finally became convinced intellectually and certain of the teachings of the Church—having had all of his arguments exhausted and refuted by his searching and probing[26]—but his will was divided between what his mind knew is True and what his disordered will desired.[27] His mind was converted, but his moral compass was still spinning.

Augustine suffered from multiple moral failings throughout his life until his experience in the garden. His most vivid descriptions of his moral indiscretions were reserved for his sexual misconduct. When he arrived in the big city of Carthage to continue his education, the young Augustine was eagerly anticipating the experience of falling in love and sexual indulgence, conflating the two as if love and sex were the same. "As yet I had never been in love and I longed to love; and from a subconscious poverty of mind I hated the thought of being less inwardly destitute. I sought an object for my love; I was in love with love",[28] he wrote in one of the most moving passages in the literary canon. He found a woman who could satisfy his desires and who would give birth to their son, Adeodatus, even though he did not marry her as she was not useful for his social ambitions. He convinced himself that he could not live a happy and fulfilled life without sex,[29] although he knew that was a lie and prayed for the virtues of chastity and continence to be given to him . . . someday.[30] Even when he sent the mother of his son back to Africa from Milan when his own mother arranged for him to get married, he could not remain chaste and so he found another woman whom he could use in the interim.[31]

A sense that a moral vision of a truly flourishing life slowly began to grow in him, but his old desire for the physical and his new desire for the spiritual were in conflict within him.[32] He begged God to relieve him of the anguish caused by his disordered heart, yet he continued to marinate in his lustful cravings.[33] Finally, in the garden, Augustine's interior tension that had slowly been building for years broke. Picking up and reading the first lines his eyes came across in Paul's longest letter, he read: "not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provisions for the flesh in its lusts (Romans 13:13–14)."[34] With these words, Augustine found the conviction to radically reorient his life. The Apostle here, note carefully, does not exhort the Church in Rome to conform their minds to the right understanding of abstract theological principles. They exhort his readers, Augustine, and us today to live upright moral lives. Augustine's grace-filled transformation in the garden was not intellectual, it was moral.

Far too often when attempting to evangelize either those who never have had an encounter with Christ or those who already have received their sacraments of initiation, we emphasize the importance of an intellectual conversion; that is, we emphasize the need to be orthodox, to have right belief. Augustine's narrative shows us, however, that the intellectual and the moral cannot be disintegrated. When we respond to the call of the Great Commission, we should help souls bring their minds *and* their wills to encounter the risen Lord, not just their minds.

Correcting Our Mistakes

Just a few years before he died in 430, Augustine wrote a text called *Retractiones* that was unprecedented in the ancient world and, according to Serge Lancel, "in its amplitude and even its principle would have no successor".[35] The title *Retractiones* is sometimes translated as "*Retractions*", but a more nuanced translation would render the Latin "*Reconsiderations*". In the prologue of this work, the aging Bishop of Hippo tells us that he intended to reconsider all his books, letters, and sermons and, "with the pen of a censor", to take a serious look at "what dissatisfies me".[36] He wanted to take stock of the ways that he had been wrong earlier in his life or, at the very least, the ways that he had fallen short of the ideal. Although he died before he was able to give his letters and sermons the same treatment, his review of his own treatises "is hardly to be matched in the literature not of Latin only but of any language".[37]

For Augustine, these reconsiderations were necessary because he understood the power of words that point towards the deepest levels of reality. In our Postmodern Age, words are said to signify nothing; their meaning is defined in relation to other words that themselves are planted in the shifting soil of context. Augustine understood words point to "things" outside themselves. So, he knew that the words he preached and wrote about the weightiness of life, death, and resurrection were pregnant with an urgency—a soteriological urgency—that meant that those words must be crafted with the utmost care. To mislead his flock or his reader (even unintentionally) by one errant word was a burden that weighed on him. He knew he needed to get his words right—and to correct those words he had gotten wrong earlier in his life.

Augustine's willingness to do the hard work of reflecting on his mistakes should be a model for us as we minister to the People of God. We all are willing to admit—at least in the abstract—that we are "only human" and that we make mistakes all of the time. Few of us, however, take this seriously enough to look in the mirror to see where that flawed humanity manifested itself concretely in our lives in general and in our ministries in particular.

Conclusion

On the surface level, the four main points of this essay do not seamlessly form a single whole because they address different aspects of ministry and evangelization. On a deeper level, however, they all point to the same fundamental idea: we do not need more money; we do not need more policies; we do not need more programs; we do not need to change our doctrine. We need an Augustinian revolution of the mind. This revolution would unleash us from a programmatic mindset by accentuating the intimacy of one-on-one relationships. It would ignite the intellectual and rhetorical dynamite of our patrimony. It would break us out of the narrow emphasis on intellectual assent and open us up to a reordering of not only our minds but also our wills. It would begin healing us from the failures of our past and position us to better confront future challenges. Fundamentally, this Augustinian revolution would lead us to *think* differently about how to bring souls to Christ.

Augustine's willingness to do the hard work of reflecting on his mistakes should be a model for us as we minister to the People of God.

Stuart Squires is a professor of theology at St. John's Seminary, the seminary for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles.

References

1. Augustine, *Confessions*. Translated by Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2009): 6.7.11.

2. Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.7.12; 5.6.10.

3.Ibid, 6.7.12.

4. Ibid, 6.12.21.

5. Ibid, 6.12.21.

6. Ibid, 8.12.30.

7. Ibid, 9.6.14

8. Pellegrino, Cardinal Michele. "General Introduction," in *Sermons: I (1–19) on the Old Testament.* The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century. Brooklyn: New City Press, (1990): pp. 85–113.

9. Augustine. *The Retractions*. Translated by Mary Inez Bogan. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, (1968): 2.32.1.

10. Augustine does not describe his narrative as one of coming to Christ, but of returning to him: ". . . when I remember the tears which I poured out at the time when I was first *recovering my faith*, and that now I am moved not by the chant but by the words being sung, when they are sung with a clear voice and entirely appropriate modulation, then again I recognize the great utility of music in worship (emphasis mine)." Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.33.50.

11. Ibid, 1.11.17.

12. Ibid, 3.4.7.

13. Ibid, 3.5.9.

14. Ibid, 3.5.9-4.1.1.

15. Ibid, 4.3.5-4.3.6.

16. Ibid, 5.10.19; 6.11.18.

17. Ibid, 5.10.20.

18. Ibid, 6.3.4.

19. Ibid, 6.3.4.

20. Ibid, 6.5.7.

21. Ibid, 6.5.7.

22. Ibid, 6.5.8.

23. Ibid, 7.9.13-7.21.27.

24. Ibid, 7.21.27.

25. Ibid, 8.6.13.

26. Ibid, 8.7.18.

27. Ibid, 8.8.19-8.11.29.

28. Ibid, 3.1.1.

29. Ibid, 6.11.20-6.13.23.

30. Ibid, 8.7.16.

31. Ibid, 6.15.25.

32. Ibid, 8.5.10.

33. Ibid, 8.11.25.

34. Ibid, 8.12.29.

35. Lancel, Serge. *Saint Augustine*. Translated by Antonia Nevill. London: SCM Press, (2002): p. 459.

36. Augustine, *The Retractions*, Prol.1. Augustine had the idea for this book as early as 412. Augustine, *Letters 211–270 (Vol. II/4). Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*. Translated by Roland J. Teske. Brooklyn: New City Press, (2005): 224.2.

37. Augustine, *The Retractions*, intro. xiii.