AUGUSTINE’S SERMONES AD POPULUM ON THE FEAST OF THE ASCENSION

A Liturgical-Soteriological Understanding of Grace

Augustine’s sermones ad populum on the Feasts of Christmas (ss. 140, 184-196A, 369, 370), and Easter (Easter Season: ss. 219-260E) have already received much attention in Augustine research.¹ His Ascension sermones (ss. 261-265F, ?377?), however, have been less studied. In Augustine’s day, the Feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost had only recently been established. Prior to this, the Easter mystery as a whole was celebrated in the 50 days following Easter: the resurrection, Christ’s appearance to his disciples, his ascension, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the return of the Lord. Distinctions came into existence in the fourth century, and by Augustine’s time the evolution was complete. His sermons clearly demonstrate that the Feasts of the Ascension and Pentecost were established on the fortieth and fiftieth days of the Easter period respectively and that they were also celebrated separately. Although both feasts had been granted a fixed place in the liturgical calendar, the content of their celebration had not yet been fixed. In this sense, Augustine’s sermons for the feast days in question serve as useful research material for the history of the liturgy.²


Augustine’s Sermones ad populum on the Feast of the Ascension

V. Saxer and G. Willis tried to reconstruct the scriptural readings on that feast day (in Augustine’s Hippo), and suggested Acts 1 and Ps 96. M. Margoni-Kögler lists, in extensive detail, the available information on possible liturgical readings on that feast day as is evidenced in Augustine’s sermones. S. Poque analysed Augustine’s use of symbolic language in discussions of Christ’s ascension. W. H. Marrewee and W. Geerlings observed that the content of this feast had for Augustine no broad theological significance, but belongs rather to the salvific enumeration of Christ’s passion, death, resurrection and ascension. At the same time their studies show that according to Augustine, Christ’s ascension is important for the life of each Christian, and has (i) christological and (ii) ecclesiological dimensions. (i) Christ’s incarnation (descensio) and ascension (ascensio) reflect his humanity and his divinity. (ii) Ecclesiologically speaking, Christ’s ascension – being the head of the Totus Christus, the Church – provides the Church with an upward dynamic. Recently A.


4. G. C. Willis, St. Augustine’s Lectionary, Alcuin Club Collection, 44 (London: SPCK, 1962) 29, 68. Sermo 261 indicates, according to Willis, that John 14:23-26 was the gospel reading in Carthage on Ascension.
5. First reading: Acts 1:1-11-? (s. 265, 1), Rev 5:1-14 [v. 5] (s. 263), probably Col 3:1f.-? (ss. 263A, 1; 395, 1). 1 Cor 15 [vv. 50-53] (s. 264, 6); Psalm: Ps 96 [v. 9] (s. 265E, 2), Ps 56 [v. 6a = 12a] (s. 262, 4). [Ps 23 (s. 377 – authentic?)]; Gospel: Mt 28:(16-20) (s. 263), Lk 24:36(?)-53 (s. 265D, 1), John 14(?)-25-28(-?) (s. 265A, 1), John 20-?:17-? (s. 265F, 1f.). M. Margoni-Kögler also briefly summarizes the ecclesiological significance of the Ascensio Christi (caput and corpus) for Augustine. M. Margoni-Kögler, Die Perikopen im Gottesdienst bei Augustinus: Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung der liturgischen Schriftenlesung in der frühen Kirche, Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Philosophisch-historische Klasse. Sitzungsberichte, 810; Veröffentlichungen der Kommission zur Herausgabe des Corpus der lateinischen Kirchenväter, 29 (Wien: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010) 126-133.
6. S. Poque gives an analysis in this context of the symbolism and the meaning of the ascension in Augustine’s writings and thinking, in comparison with examples from antiquity (such as e.g. Ovidius en Cicero) and with the commentary of more recent thinkers (such as e.g. Heidegger, Jung en Vergote). S. Poque, Le langage symbolique dans la prédication d’Augustin d’Hippone: Images héroïques. Tome I: Texte (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1984) 281-341.
9. “The Ascension of Christ has given to the Church a sense of direction and at the same time a dynamic force, through which she is unceasingly moved and drawn towards her goal: the participation in the glory which Christ as her Head has achieved. This is in fact a predominant theme in Augustine’s elaboration on the mystery of the Ascension. Several times he describes the Ascension of Christ as a going-before; in the Ascension Christ acts as a forerunner, thus indicating that His Body, the Church, is to follow the
Bizzozero, in his doctoral research of the presence of the Paschal mystery in Augustine’s *sermones ad populum*, distinguishes three fundamental aspects of Easter in his Ascension *sermones*. They indicate the soteriological identity of Christ based on his incarnated nature (Christ ascended with his human body), the glorification of the resurrected Christ *ad dexteram Patris* (as is formulated in the *credo*), and they provide reassurance that the ascended Christ remains permanently related to the faithful.¹⁰

These 12 (13) *sermones* thus have an explicitly christological content and are often moralising in style; they function as appeals to follow the ascended Christ in an upward direction: *sursum cor*. M. Pellegrino points out that the most important doctrinal content of this liturgical formula is, for Augustine, the call to turn away from what is earthly and to turn towards what is heavenly. In this interpretation, *sursum cor* represents the Christian life, specifically the love of believers for Christ, the orientation of the body toward the head, a hopeful focus on living with Christ in heaven.¹¹ While the sermons in question have been studied for the infor-

same course and is to join Him eventually in His glory.” Marrevee, *The Ascension of Christ*, pp. 147-148.


E. Dassmann shows that Augustine does not deal with the theme of ascension in an isolated way, but that he considers both the resurrection and ascension as integral parts of the glorification of Christ. The goal of Christ’s ascension was to prevent the disciples from remaining *in carne*. Christ’s ascension made it possible for mankind to also ascend. E. Dassmann, “Jenseitsfahrt,” *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 17 (1995) 448-457, esp. pp. 452-453.

¹⁰ A. Bizzozero, *Il mistero pasquale di Gesù Cristo e l’esistenza credente nei Sermones di Agostino*, Patrologia – Beiträge zum Studium der Kirchenväter, 23 (Frankfurt am Main/Berlin/Bern/Bruxelles/New York/Oxford/Wien: Peter Lang, 2010) 263-270. Bizzozero studies the centrality of the Easter mystery in Augustine’s ca. 580 preserved *sermones ad populum*. This centrality is both descriptive-speculative-christological – the Easter event is the *crux* of the theology developed in the *sermones* (systematic theology) – and normative- anthropological-moral, since it is according to Augustine’s preaching, the basis and even the task of Christian life (pastoral theology). This centrality of the paschal mystery is double because of the specific genre of Augustine’s sermons: they are at the same time theological reflections and pastoral exhortations, in which Augustine simultaneously looks for the truth and proclaims and applies it.

mation they provide concerning the liturgical situation at the beginning of
the fifth century and for Augustine’s understanding of the liturgy and the
liturgical Feast of the Ascension, and while general studies of the Chris-
tology and ecclesiology in Augustine’s sermones (on Ascension) have
also been carried out, little if any attention has been paid to the presence
of the theme of grace in these liturgical sermons. To come to a better
understanding of Augustine’s doctrine of grace, it is essential to also take
his sermones into account, to determine whether the difference in genre
between the sermones (a pastoral and liturgical genre, aimed at explain-
ing the Scriptures and exhorting people to a moral life) and the system-
atic writings (which have a polemical and systematic-dogmatic nature,
and especially those engaged in the Pelagian controversy) influenced
Augustine’s dealing with the theme of grace. Does Augustine in his ser-
mons also explain that the good Christian life is ultimately not the work
of human beings, but that it is the result of God’s grace, as he does in his
doctrinal (anti-Pelagian) writings? After all, at first sight it does not seem
very ‘strategic’ to urge the faithful to do their best and at the same time to
say that, actually, they do not have full control, but that everything is the
work of God.

This article investigates the way in which the notion of gratia is pre-
sent in the liturgical sermons delivered on the occasion of the Feast of the
Ascension.

1. Overview of the Ascension Sermones

Sermo 261

Augustine suggests that celebrating the ascension in a good way involves
rising up with the Lord and lifting up one’s own heart to him. Lifting
one’s heart up to the Lord – who humbled himself – is not pride, but
represents seeking refuge in him (cf. Ps 90:1). Through the resurrection
came hope. Christ came down to heal man, he rose up, to raise man up.
Only the Lord can raise men up. Whoever seeks to do this himself, will
fall. The immortality that God bestows on man is not the same as that of

12. s. 261, 1.
s. 261: Kunzelmann: 19/05/410, Ascension, Hill: 418, Ascension, Rebillard:
Carthago, 410 or 418, Gryson: Ascension, 418.
R. Gryson, B. Fischer, H. J. Frede, Répertoire général des auteurs ecclésiastiques
latins de l’Antiquité et du haut Moyen Âge (5e édition mise à jour du Verzeichnis der
Sigel für Kirchenschriftsteller), Vetus Latina, Die Reste der altlateinischen Bibel, 1/1
(Freiburg: Herder, 2007). P.-M. Hombert, Nouvelles recherches de chronologie augusti-
nienne, Collection des Études Augustiniennes, Série Antiquité, 163 (Paris: Institut
Christ: that of man is solely without end, that of Christ was also without beginning. Moreover, man will, in eternity, not be equal to the Father, as Christ is. Augustine urges his listeners to seek God in earnest, and not in a frivolous way, that is, not through being argumentative and wanting to be proved right.  

13. The preacher declares that he himself follows Paul’s example in this quest. It is the grace of Paul that works in him: Paul was the hardest worker, not in and of himself, but through the grace of Christ that was in him (1 Cor 15:10).  

14. To be able to see God, who is completely pure, the heart needs to be cleansed (cf. Mt 5:8), the phantasmata, (for example the love of money) that make the heart impure, need to be removed.  

15. In order to see God, everything that displeases him (such as avaritia) needs to be removed from the heart. In this cleansing process, man needs to humbly ask God for help.  

16. God in se is too much for man. This is why he became man (John 1:14). As God incarnate, Christ is the goal and the way to that goal for man. Christ was put to death as a man, and not in his Godhood.  

17. By loving Christ, man fulfils the two commandments to love God and one’s neighbour (Mt 22:37-40), for Christ is God (John 1:1) and man (John 1:14).  

18. Augustine prays that God, through his grace, through his support and comfort, will cleanse man, and he calls on his listeners to do good works. He urges them to forgive one another and to pray the “Our Father,” as a remedy for sin. Here on earth, man is unable to live without sinning. It is not only the severe offences such as murder, adultery, blasphemy that are sins. Even listening to something
one should not, thinking something one should not, is sin. After baptism (Tit 3:5), the daily remedy for sin is: to pray the ‘Our Father’ (especially Mt 6:12), to give alms (Lk 11:41), and to forgive one’s fellow man. The sum of small sins is significant – drops of rain fill rivers, grains of corn fill barns. Christ bestowed felicitas on us: he put death to death.

Sermo 262

Christ, who is God, and equal in all respects to the Father, became man without losing the form of God. He was born so that we could be born again. He died so that we would never need to die. He rose on the third day and promised man the resurrection of the flesh. After the resurrection, he allowed himself to be touched by his disciples; he remained with them for 40 days to convince them “quod factus erat, non auferens quod semper erat.” He came and went; he ate and drank – not that he needed to do so, but he did so as a sign of his potentia and in order to show the disciples the veritas carnis. The Feast of the Ascension in this church (i.e., the church where Augustine gave this sermon) coincides with the burial of Leontius, the founder of this basilica. The Feast of the Ascension is celebrated throughout the whole world. For man’s sake, he became man (tired, thirsty, hungry). He underwent the passio and death. This Christ has now been lifted up, lifted up his own needy flesh. We however see the consequences of it; in particular we see the glory of the Church, which has spread over the whole earth as the bride of Christ.

Sermo 263 [Guelferbytanus 21]

The glorification of Christ is completed in his ascension. The purpose of his resurrection is to give man an example of the resurrection. The reason for the ascension is to protect man from above. Christ paid the price for man on the cross, and, though seated above, he gathered together what he purchased with his blood. When he has gathered all together, he will return at the end of time, not veiled as he was the first time, but overtly
(Ps 50:3). He had to come veiled the first time, in order to be condemned (1 Cor 2:8) – and in this way to be able to put death to death, to defeat the devil. He returns overtly in order to be judge. The devil killed the first man through leading him astray. By killing the *nouissimum* (the last man), the devil lost the first man from his snare.\(^{28}\) The Lord’s cross is a sort of mousetrap for the devil. Through the death of Christ, the devil has been defeated.\(^ {29}\) Believing with the eyes of the heart is much more important than simply seeing with the eyes in one’s head. We have not ourselves seen Christ’s resurrection and ascension, but we know it through our faith, with the eyes of the heart (cf. John 20:29). Whoever believes in him, shall see him. He does not stand before us, perceptible to our eyes, but he owns the heart of the believer.\(^ {30}\)

*Sermon* 263A \[Sermo ab A. Mai editus 98\]

For Augustine, the ascension is the reason for the appeal: “Let our hearts rise up with the Lord” (cf. Col 3:1-2). Just as Christ rose up without leaving us, in the same way, we are there with him, even though that which has been promised to us has not yet taken place in our body. He has risen above the heavens and at the same time he suffers on earth that which we suffer as members of his body (cf. Acts 9:4; Mt 25:35). We have to endure difficulties here on earth in such a way that we, together with him, find our rest in heaven, through faith, hope, love, through which we are united with him. He, there, is with us, and we, here, are with him. He did not leave heaven when he came down for us, nor did he leave us when he rose back up to heaven.\(^ {31}\) The verse John 3:13 (“No one has gone up to heaven except the one who came down from heaven, the Son of man”) also applies to us through our being united with Christ (1 Cor 12:12). Christ is our head and we are the body. We are in Christ through grace. In him we rise up, as though we were one. We are the seed of Abraham and Christ is the seed of Abraham (Gal 3:16, 29). In heaven we will put off the flesh of our mortal nature. The body will be easily lifted up, if the spirit is not born down with the heavy burden of sin.\(^ {32}\) Some *haeretici*
question how a body that has not come down from heaven, can rise up to heaven. John 3:13, according to Augustine, refers to the person, not to something that belonged to the person. He came down without the clothing of a body. He rose up clothed with a body. The body that he took on does not make him another person. We too will rise up, as a result of our being united with him (Eph 5:31-32; Mk 10:8). Prior to his death, Christ had no longing for food and drink. That is why he fasted for 40 days, in order that our pain might be expressed in him. This is a warning not to give in to the temptations of this world. After his resurrection, he no longer needed food and drink. During 40 days, he ate and drank with his disciples. He did this to express his comfort to us. While we are travellers in this life, we must fast because of the vanity of the present, and we must celebrate the promise of the time to come.

Sermo 264

Augustine suggests that the significance of the ascension should be explained, despite the haste of some to leave for their meal. He will preach about the inner (sacramental) significance of Christ’s ascension in the body with which he rose from the dead. After his resurrection, Christ

33. s. 263A, 3. Van Bavel points out that the argument regarding the clothing (habitus) – which also occurs in De agone christiano 25, 27 – may well contain a reaction against Apollinarianism. According to H. R. Drobner however, it is a reaction against the Arians. This hypothesis is less probable, since the theme of the physical ascension does not occur in the writings in which Augustine was systematically going through and refuting the arguments of the Arians. A. Zumkeller surmises that it was more likely to be the Gnostic Docetism of Appelles that Augustine was targeting. P.-M. Hombert elaborates on Zumkeller’s suggestion. H. R. Drobner, Person-exegese und Christologie bei Augustinus: Zur Herkunft der Formel Una Persona, Philosophia Patrum: Interpretations of Patristic Texts, 8 (Leiden: Brill, 1986) 112-113. A. Habitzky (trans.), A. Zumkeller (introd., com.), Aurelius Augustinus: Der christliche Kampf und die christliche Lebensweise (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1961) 69. P.-M. Hombert, “L’exégèse augustinienne de Io. 3, 13 entre orient et occident,” in L’Esegesi dei Padri Latini: Dalle origini a Gregorio Magno. XXVIII Incontro di studiosi dell’antichità cristiana. Roma, 6-8 maggio 1999, Vol. 1, Studia Ephemerides Augustinianum, 68 (Roma: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2000) 335-361, pp. 338-339. T. J. van Bavel, Recherches sur la christologie de Saint Augustin: L’humain et le divin dans le Christ d’après Saint Augustin, Paradosis: Études de littérature et de théologie ancienne, 10 (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires Fribourg, 1954) 35.

34. s. 263A, 4. Food in this comparison represents the hope of peace, which will only be perfected in our immortality. The number 40 (10×4=40) indicates this time during which we are under the grace of Christ’s life. The ten commandments of the law (10) have been spread throughout the whole world through the grace of Christ. (4: the four corners of the earth as symbol for the whole world).

35. s. 264, 1.

remained with his disciples for 40 days, in acknowledgement of their weakness, to encourage their faith, and to confirm that what had been restored before their eyes by the resurrection was the same as what had been taken away by the cross. Christ did not however want their focus to be on his flesh lest they be held back by merely human love. For this reason he remained with them to help them toward a more spiritual faith in him as God, and that is why he needed to withdraw himself from their sight. He therefore remained with them for 40 days to convince them of his bodily resurrection, but his ascension was intended to show them his divinity.\textsuperscript{36} Christ’s ascension was therefore intended to convince the apostles that the Christ is equal to the Father, to not let them halt at his humanity. Whoever sees the Father as greater than the Son, sees the Son merely as man. In his humility Christ took on flesh, and so the Father is indeed greater than him (John 14:28), but as the Son of God, Christ is completely equal with the Father (John 10:30; 14:9). By taking on the flesh, Christ did not in any way change as God. Whoever puts on a piece of clothing does not change into that piece of clothing. A senator in the clothes of a slave remains a senator. As a man, Christ is less than the Father, but as God, he is equal to the Father. For this reason, ten days later, Christ sent the Holy Spirit to help the disciples to move on from what is “fleshly” to what is “spiritual,” namely, to faith and love.\textsuperscript{37} Christ remained 40 days to demonstrate that throughout the time of our life on earth, faith in the incarnation is essential for all. Christ came to cleanse and restore the inner eye – needed in order to recognize him – that had become foul through sin.\textsuperscript{38} As long as a man is in this body, he has to

36. s. 264, 2.
37. s. 264, 4.
38. s. 264, 3: Christ is equal to the Father in nature, powerful in the might of his greatness, weak in compassion for mankind; powerful to create all things, weak to recreate all things.
39. s. 264, 5. Why did Christ remain exactly 40 (10×4=40) days with the disciples: 10 represents the fullness of wisdom, 4 represents the world (the 4 corners of the world) and time (the 4 seasons). The Lord fasted for 40 days. This means that the believers should refrain from all corruption for as long as they are in the world. Elijah – representing the prophets – and Moses – representing the law – fasted for 40 days to demonstrate that even the prophets and the law learn this same lesson of abstinence. Israel remained in the desert for 40 years. The ark (the Church) floated on the water for 40 days. It was made from planks that did not rot, and these represent the souls of those who are holy and just. As long as the Church lives in this world and is cleansed by the water of baptism, as with the flood, the Church will have good as well as wicked members, just as there were clean and unclean animals in the ark. After the flood, Noah offered a number of cleansed animals: here on earth we are mixed, but after the flood, God only accepts those who have made themselves clean. Faith in the incarnation is necessary in this time on earth, as long as the ark is floating on the waters of the flood. If we believe now in the flesh of Christ, then we will later share in the greatness and divinity of Christ.
believe in the incarnate Christ. This same flesh of ours will be resurrected; for the wicked, it will be to eternal punishment, but for the godly, the flesh will be transformed into an immortal body. That God should create a heavenly body from flesh is not so amazing. He created all things out of nothing; he changed water into wine. If he could give a man existence, he is then indeed able to restore him, and to reward faith with glorification. Christ allowed himself to be touched by his disciples: man, flesh, and weakness were touched, but God, wisdom, and power were understood. Augustine concludes that finally the members will follow the head. 39

Sermo 265

Christ revealed himself to the disciples after the resurrection during 40 days, to build up their faith. That miracle was too immense to be revealed in one day alone. He ate and drank, not however from necessity. 40 Ascension means that the head goes first, in order to give the members hope. He will however return, as true man and God, to make men into gods. Christ’s ascension and resurrection should not so much amaze us, as lead us to praise. What should amaze us however, is his descent into hell and his death. “Our sin was our ruin; our price, the blood of Christ; our hope, the resurrection of Christ; its realization, the coming of Christ.” 41 The disciples, as do we, want to know when the Lord will return (cf. Acts 1:6). They asked him (on our behalf also) when he would return as judge (when the kingdom would come), visible for all men (and not only for the disciples) to make a division between left and right (between the wicked and the godly)? 42 Christ answered (to the disciples and to us) that it is actually not our business to know this. Augustine exhorts to live in such a way that Christ could come today and that he would not find us afraid when he comes. 43 This answer demonstrates Christ’s ability to be magister. He did not give them the answer to their question (because this was not for them to know, it was not good for them – Acts 1:7); instead he gave them the answer to a question they did not ask. 44 The disciples asked when the judgement would be, and Christ gave an answer concern-

39. s. 264, 6.
40. s. 265, 1.
42. s. 265, 3.
43. s. 265, 4.
44. s. 265, 5.
ing the place of the Church (Acts 1:8): ‘be the bride (as Church) of the bridegroom, and wait without inquisitiveness’. In this way, Christ emphasizes, according to Augustine, the unity of the Church. Christ’s last desire before his ascension – his last will and testament – was to secure unity in the Church. Christ was glorified twice: through his resurrection and through his ascension. There will be a third glorification, namely when he returns for the judgement. Christ also gave the Holy Spirit twice, after his resurrection (John 20:22) and at Pentecost (Acts 1:8). Augustine indicates that he does not himself know the reason why the Holy Spirit was given twice. For the time being he considers that the Spirit was given twice to emphasize the two commandments of caritas: love of God and neighbour (Mt 22:37-40). Just as the one Spirit has been given twice, there is one caritas and two commandments. It is the same caritas that is given to God and to one’s neighbour, though God and one’s neighbour are not one and the same. To love God is the greatest and the first commandment, but it can only be fulfilled by first loving one’s neighbour (1 John 4:20). In order to delineate love for one’s neighbour, Christ gave the Holy Spirit (love for one’s neighbour), while he was still visible on earth. Subsequently, from heaven, out of his highest love, he sent the Holy Spirit (love for God). This caritas is a gift from the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). “What do you have that you have not received (1 Cor 4:7)?” This caritas can only be found within the unity of the Church. Christ will bring together, not divide (Lk 13:34; John 10:16). Cupiditas longs to divide, while caritas unites. Christ’s inheritance will not be divided, but possessed communally. In his resurrection, ascension and giving of the Holy Spirit, Christ recommends the Church to us. He commends the unity of the Church.

Sermo 265A [Sermo a F. Liverani editus 8]

Christ became for us what we are, and at the same time he kept the form in which he is equal with the Father. He came to share our weakness, but at the same time did not relinquish his own divine greatness. He is God above us and at the same time man with us. As man he did many things

45. s. 265, 6.
46. s. 265, 7. Christ foresaw the division, but did not want the tunica (cf. John 19:23-24) to be torn. The tunica symbolises the unity, the caritas.
47. s. 265, 8.
48. s. 265, 9.
49. s. 265, 10.
50. s. 265, 11.
51. s. 265, 12. That during Pentecost every disciple spoke every language, prefigures, according to Augustine, the unity of the Church.
for us. He took on humanity in order to hide his divine nature. Only his humanity was visible. Many who were unable to make that distinction began haereses, as did the Arians, for example, who maintain that God the Father is greater than God the Son.\textsuperscript{52} The Arians put forward the claim that the Father is greater in magnitudo than the Son. Augustine responds that magnitudo only relates to “mole aliqua corporali,” while God is spirit (John 4:24). Spiritual matters cannot be compared to corporeal matters. Something can only be called greater or lesser if there is a certain physical forma. God however, is great not in quantity (\textit{non mole}), but in power (\textit{sed uirtute magnus est}). If we think of God: “nulla oculis nostris species carnis occurrat.”\textsuperscript{53} Arians maintain that tempore, aetate the Father is \textit{maior} than the Son. According to them, the one who \textit{gignit} is older than the one who \textit{nascitur}, and it is therefore impossible for both to be coaeuus. According to Augustine, however, this way of reasoning testifies to fleshly thinking, to construing the divine relations in terms of human reproduction. Augustine continues the comparison: sons are younger than their fathers, yet at the same time they are stronger than their fathers, since fathers become weak in their old age. According to this logic, the Son would be stronger than the Father, while the Arians maintain exactly the opposite. They should, according to him, cease conceiving of divine mysteries \textit{humano sensu}.\textsuperscript{54} There are also examples of shared temporality (eternity) between \textit{creatura} and \textit{generator}, namely, fire (in substance) and radiance (in appearance). The radiance is born from fire, but there is never fire without radiance; \textit{splendor} is thus coaeus with \textit{ignis}. If fire were eternal, then its radiance would also be eternal.\textsuperscript{55} “The Father is greater than I” (John 14:28) must therefore be read alongside “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). Christ is less than the Father as man (physically), but equal to the Father as God (spiritually).\textsuperscript{56} Augustine supports this explanation with Scripture quotations (1 John 5:20; Phil 2:6-7; John 10:30; Mk 14:34).\textsuperscript{57} He concludes that it is essential to read Scripture carefully and to ask the Lord for understanding in doing so.\textsuperscript{58}
As proof that he had risen in the same body that hung on the cross, and in proof of the now imperishable immortality of his body, Christ remained with his disciples for 40 days. He rose up to heaven with the very same body in which he had visited the underworld. He put on the very same body in heaven that he himself had made in the womb of his mother. How can a body rise up to heaven when that body has not descended from heaven (cf. John 3:13)? Humanity was joined together with divinity in such a way that Word, soul and flesh were and are one person, one Christ. The two natures of Christ share proprietaes. Each substantia shares its own names with the other: the divine names with the human substantia, and the human names with the divine substantia. In this way the “Son of God” (Mt 16:13, 16) can be called man and the “Son of man” (Mt 26:64; John 1:51) can be called God, while both are identical with Christ. Augustine emphasizes that Christ is continually present and remains so, both in heaven and on earth. If the Father had not surrendered life (1 John 5:20) – that is, Christ – then we would not have had life (John 3:16; 6:51). If life itself had not died, then death would not have been defeated. Life did not only die, life continued to live; life rose again and in putting death to death through his death, he gave us life. Through Christ we are inheritors of eternal life; through him we are rescued from continuing death, and have become members of his body.

Christ’s ascension is an invitation to us to lift up our hearts. He ascended in his body; we are certain that we will follow him in the flesh. Therefore, Augustine preaches, man must do what is good here on earth in order to obtain a permanent dwelling place in heaven. Sursum cor! Man needs to lift himself up away from the earth (cf. Col 3:1-2). The body is not able to do this, but the spirit can. The most valuable possession is the heart: with the heart we possess all that we possess. Of our body, our eyes are our most precious possession. We are willing to give away all
that we have for our eyes.\textsuperscript{64} Even more important than the eyes is \textit{mens} (soul, spirit). If you lose this \textit{mens}, then you are an animal. If you lose your eyes, then you are still a man (\textit{homo}). Augustine urges his listeners to use this \textit{mens} to believe in God. Faith is in \textit{mens}, in the heart. The preacher lets Christ speak to his public: ‘In order that you would believe that you will ascend to me, I first descended to you. In order that you would believe that you will live through me, I first died for you.’\textsuperscript{65}

\textit{Sermo} 265D \textit{[Sermo a G. Morin editus 17]}

The Manicheans think that Christ is only \textit{spiritus} and not \textit{corpus}. This is what the disciples originally thought when they saw the risen Lord (Lk 24:37).\textsuperscript{66} Christ allowed himself to be touched, however, because he wanted to prove that he was also flesh and blood. If it was not wrong to think that Christ was only \textit{spiritus}, (even if he had real flesh), then he would have left his disciples in their misconception (cf. Lk 24:38-39).\textsuperscript{67} Christ is Word and man, soul and flesh. Christ is one person. Sometimes he speaks in terms of his being the Word, and yet it is still Christ himself who is speaking. Sometimes he speaks in terms of his soul (Mk 14:34), yet it is the same Christ. Sometimes he speaks in terms of his being in the flesh, and yet it is the same Christ who is speaking. As Word, he said that he and the Father are one (John 10:30). In his body, he underwent death (Lk 24:46). The last cannot be said, however, of either the Word or of the soul of Christ, for neither had sin. Since his physical death was real, his resurrection was also physical and real. There was death, yet without sin. In him there was punishment without guilt, so that for us, punishment and guilt might be resolved.\textsuperscript{68} Christ died without sin. He wanted to pay back for us the debt he did not owe, in order to free us from our debt. The devil possessed mankind. Christ brought his mortal flesh and shed his mortal blood in order to pay off the debt for our sins. The devil would still have a hold on us (who are guilty), if he had not killed the innocent Christ. Christ was not contaminated through Adam, because he was born of a virgin. Through living righteously, Christ committed no sin. He was, then, born without guilt and he lived a life without guilt. Christ died be-

\textsuperscript{64}. \textit{s. 265C}, 1. Augustine rejects greed, or the accumulation of earthly treasures.
\textsuperscript{66}. \textit{s. 265C}, 2.
\textsuperscript{67}. \textit{s. 265D}, 1.
cause this was the Father’s will, not because he had any debt to the devil.\(^9\) Christ is life: neither the soul, nor the Word died, what died was the flesh. Christ died in order that death should die. Christ’s cross was a mousetrap for the devil. After the resurrection he had the same body, but now immortal: the same \textit{natura}, but a changed \textit{qualitas}.\(^70\) In that same flesh, in the same body that was touched by the disciples, Christ will return (cf. Acts 1:11). It was Christ who gave the disciples the capacity to proclaim that truth and to die for it; they could not do so in and of themselves. No one can receive something, unless it has been given from heaven (cf. John 3:27).\(^71\) We must not boast too much about our own \textit{uires}, too much trust in the decision of our own will (cf. Jer 17:5). “Ad peccandum idoneus es solus: ad recte faciendum indiges adiutore.” It is not the case that Christ was a man who, through living a worthy life, deserved to take up the Word. It was necessary for Christ to die for us, but there was nothing in the Word which had to die: only life, without anything fickle. That is why Christ became man.\(^72\)

\textit{Sermo} 265E [\textit{Sermo} a C. Lambot editus 16]

The cross is the ransom for man. Man’s debt has been paid by Christ. What has been accomplished by Christ’s blood is the resurrection, the sending of the Holy Spirit, the promise of the dispersed Church. What has been promised is the end of heathendom, the coming of heresies, and martyrdom. God has always kept all his promises, so he will certainly


\(^70\). s. 265D, 5.

\(^71\). s. 265D, 6.

\(^72\). s. 265D, 7.
also keep the promise of the day of judgement.\textsuperscript{73} Christ has been lifted up (Ps 97:9; Phil 2:7-11) because he humbled himself. Christ was first lifted up, since he was completely equal with God. He subsequently humbled himself by becoming man, by taking on himself what he was not, without losing what he was. Being God, he took on the form of a servant (Phil 2:7): God hidden in manhood. Because of his humiliation and obedience unto death, he was lifted up by the Father.\textsuperscript{74} Christ has been raised up by the Father “above all gods” (Ps 97:9). The ‘gods’ here are people who have been adopted by God through grace, but there is only one natural son, namely, Christ. There is a difference between Christ and these god-people. Humanity is born mortal, as a consequence of sexual longing (\textit{concupiscentialis conceptus}), and so still has to overcome the \textit{corruptio} to which his flesh is subject. Christ is born as a consequence of divine compassion, died as a result of divine goodness, came by way of the virgin birth, and has already risen, since his flesh is without \textit{corruptio} (Acts 13:36-37).\textsuperscript{75} The last words of Christ before his ascension referred to a prophecy concerning the Church spread throughout the world (Acts 1:7-9).\textsuperscript{76} The Church is the \textit{gloria} of Christ, just as the wife is the \textit{gloria} of her husband (1Cor 11:7).\textsuperscript{77}

\textit{Sermo 265F [Sermo a C. Lambot editus 25]}

He who is our Lord was prepared to become our brother through becoming man, through becoming a servant (Phil 2:6-7; Mk 10:45). He serves us because we are sick, in order to restore us to health. He provides the cure through his own weakness. He shed his blood, and indeed gave his blood as an ointment for the eyes.\textsuperscript{78} As Christ’s brothers, we have the same God and Father in common, but in a different way. He was without sin, the natural son; we are all sinners and sons through adoption.\textsuperscript{79} We form one large family (Rom 8:17). Christ never left heaven and he will never leave us. He is still in heaven and also continually with us. In Christ’s ascension, it was not only divinity that ascended, but also the body. In the same form that he was tried, he will come again to judge (cf.

\textsuperscript{73} s. 265E, 1.
\textsuperscript{75} s. 265E, 2.
\textsuperscript{76} s. 265E, 3.
\textsuperscript{77} s. 265E, 4.
\textsuperscript{78} s. 265E, 5.
\textsuperscript{79} s. 265F, 1.
Acts 1:11), and he will be visible to both the righteous and the unrighteous.  

Sermo 377

Augustine preaches about Christ as all-embracing. In the incarnation, Christ, the Word, came down in the form of a servant (Phil 2:7-8). In this form he progressed in the study of wisdom; in this form he exercised his exemplary patience; in this form he strove courageously; in this form he died; in this form he conquered death, and rose again: in this form he returned to heaven, without ever having left heaven. As a giant, he conquered death by dying (Ps 19:5), and broke the doors of hell. Christ is at the same time man (in his suffering) and God (in his resurrection) as God he descended into hell and as man he was taken up into heaven. He underwented death for mortal man. He suffered for all.

2. Content Analysis

In his sermons on the Ascension, Augustine seeks particularly to explain the significance of this feast. He usually refers to the significance of the number 40; there are 40 days between Easter and Ascension. Augustine explains that Christ remained with the disciples for 40 days, allowing himself to be touched by them, in order to strengthen their faith in his bodily resurrection. Thereafter, on the day of the ascension, he ascended to heaven, in order to bring into balance their faith in his bodily resurrection with faith in his divinity. The ascension was intended to convince the apostles that Christ is equal with the Father, so that they would not remain focused on his humanity. This is why Christ also sent the Holy Spirit ten days later, to help the disciples to progress from a ‘fleshy’ to a ‘spiritual’ faith.

The Ascension sermons have a moral message: man needs to lift up his own heart. Augustine does emphasize that man requires God’s help to lift up his heart. Without God’s help, man can only ever fall.

80. s. 265F, 3. Augustine makes a comparison: Christ is simultaneously in heaven and on earth, just as a spoken word can be simultaneously “in my spirit and in your ear.”
81. s. 377.
83. ss. 263 A, 4; 264, 2; 265, 1; 265B, 1. See also s. 265D, 1.
84. ss. 264, 4-5. See also s. 263A, 4 where the theme of the 40 days is explicitly connected to grace.
85. s. 261, 1.
Augustine rejects *aurititia* and too great a focus on earthly things. Augustine calls for humility, for keeping the double commandment to love God and neighbour (Matt 22), for praying the Our Father, for forgiveness of one’s fellow man, and for the giving of alms as remedies for small sins.

The Feast of the Ascension is, then, a call to faith. Believing with the eyes of the heart is much more important than seeing only with the eyes in one’s head. We have after all not seen Christ’s resurrection and ascension with our eyes, but we know through our faith, with the eyes of the heart. Augustine encourages them as *mens* – that is, in their heart – to believe in God. On the one hand, Augustine urges his listeners to seek God, and, with this in mind, to cleanse their hearts, but at the same time he emphasizes that this seeking of God happens because of God’s grace, and that in order to cleanse the heart, God’s help is needed. The apostles received from Christ the capacity to proclaim the truth of the faith and to die for it; they were not able to do so in and of themselves. At Pentecost, the disciples received the Holy Spirit, which was to bring them to ‘spiritual’ faith. For that matter, it is not only faith that is a gift of God, but also all human *uires* are given to man by God. When Augustine appeals to them to do good works, he also indicates that their capacity to do so stems from grace.

This collection of sermons for the Feast of the Ascension are thoroughly christological. In this christological context, Augustine responds several times to heterodox movements, such as Apollinarianism, Arianism, and Manichaeism. In the Ascension sermons, Augustine returns regularly to the physicality of Christ in his resurrection and ascension. Augustine emphasizes that it was always the same body that was in-

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86. ss. 261, 5; 263A, 1.4; 265C, 1.
87. s. 261, 6.
88. ss. 261, 8; 265, 9.
89. s. 261, 10.
90. s. 263, 3. See above ss. 264, 2.4.5; 265, 1.
91. s. 265C, 2.
92. s. 261, 2.4.5.
93. s. 261, 3.
94. s. 261, 6.
95. s. 265D, 6.
96. s. 264, 4.
97. s. 265D, 7.
98. s. 261, 9.
99. s. 263A, 3.
100. s. 265A, 2-7.
101. s. 265D, 1. It is even possible that the emphasis on the christological-ecclesiological unity in s. 265, 7.11-12 contains a reference to the Donatists.
volved.\textsuperscript{102} Christ allowed himself to be touched by the disciples to show that he was not only \textit{spiritus}.\textsuperscript{103} The ascension demonstrated that Christ, although he had taken on a human body, is yet, as God, completely equal with the Father. Augustine repeats emphatically that Christ, his humanity notwithstanding, is completely divine and equal to the Father. The one person Christ was both human and divine; he spoke from his body, from his soul, and from his divinity.\textsuperscript{104} Yet it is not in his divinity, but rather in his humanity that Christ was put to death.\textsuperscript{105}

In addition to emphasizing the humanity of Christ, Augustine also emphasizes that Christ is fundamentally different from man. Christ’s immortality – in contrast to the immortality granted to men through Christ – is without beginning.\textsuperscript{106} More fundamentally, Christ is without sin: he is born without original sin and is without personal sin. He is by nature son of God; other people only become such through adoption.\textsuperscript{107}

We come in this way to Augustine’s emphasis on grace in these sermons. Christ was born and died for mankind, and in this way he brought death to an end. By giving his own blood on the cross as a ransom to purchase our freedom, he defeated the devil.\textsuperscript{108} He heals us.\textsuperscript{109} He creates and restores man.\textsuperscript{110} This unity with Christ is also a form of grace; Christ is our head, and we are the body. We are in Christ through faith.\textsuperscript{111} The number 40 indicates the time in which we live, through grace, through Christ. The ten commandments of the Law have been spread to the four corners of the world through the grace of Christ (ten times four is forty).\textsuperscript{112} Grace is also discussed at other moments in the Ascension sermons: without God’s help, fallen man is not himself able to rise up;\textsuperscript{113} grace is needed in order to seek God;\textsuperscript{114} God’s help is needed to cleanse the heart;\textsuperscript{115} God’s grace is necessary to do good works;\textsuperscript{116} \textit{caritas} is nec-

\textsuperscript{102.} ss. 265B, 1. See also ss. 265B, 2-3, where Augustine discusses the \textit{communicatio idiomatum}.

\textsuperscript{103.} ss. 262, 1 (\textit{veritas carnis}); 265D, 2-6.

\textsuperscript{104.} ss. 264, 2-7; 265A, 2-7; 265B, 2-3; 265D, 3. See also ss. 377.

\textsuperscript{105.} s. 261, 7.

\textsuperscript{106.} s. 261, 2.

\textsuperscript{107.} ss. 265D, 3-4; 265E, 2-3.

\textsuperscript{108.} ss. 261, 11; 262, 1-4; 263, 1-2; 265, 2; 265A, 2; 265B, 4-5; 265D, 3-5; 265E, 1.

See also ss. 377.

\textsuperscript{109.} ss. 261, 1; 265F, 1.

\textsuperscript{110.} s. 264, 6.

\textsuperscript{111.} s. 263A, 2.

\textsuperscript{112.} s. 263A, 4.

\textsuperscript{113.} s. 261, 1.

\textsuperscript{114.} s. 261, 3.

\textsuperscript{115.} s. 261, 6.

\textsuperscript{116.} s. 264, 9-11.
necessary for Church unity, and this *caritas* is given by God. Caritas is a gift of the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5), and since all that man has, has been given by God (1 Cor 4:7), understanding, faith, and all *uires* come from him.

3. Concluding Observations

The Ascension sermons studied here contain elements that have been pointed out in the studies of Marrevee and Geerlings: the *Totus Christus*, the continuing presence of Christ, and the death of Christ as the death of death. These sermons also prove to be thoroughly Christological. The physicality of the resurrection is accentuated, while at the same time, Augustine emphasizes that Christ, despite his physicality, was without *concupiscentia* or *corruptio*, and that in his divinity he is completely equal to the Father.

These sermons also prove to have a clear moral message: a call to a virtuous Christian life, and in particular, the invitation to a correct faith with a heart that is lifted up to God. The emphasis, however, is not simply on human activity and human responsibility. It is precisely Christ’s ascension that makes a correct and spiritual resurrection faith in Christ’s divinity possible. More fundamentally, Augustine suggests that human actions and faith are made possible through God’s grace.

The subject of grace is by no means absent in the Ascension *sermones*. For example, the relationship between grace and Law is cautiously present in the Ascension *sermo* 263A. Christ, who calls us by and to grace, fulfills and spreads the Law. *Sermo* 263A points emphatically to the relationship between *misericordia* and *gratia*. Christ’s *descensio* is a question of *misericordia*. Our *ascensio* takes place thanks to his *gratia*. *Sermo* 265B expresses that all that man has, has been received from God. Faith, the cleansing of the heart in order to come to faith, *caritas*, understanding, and the human *uires*, are all forms of grace emphasized in in *sermones* 261, 264, 265A, 265D. We found in particular, examples of Easter grace: Christ died to save man from the death of sin, and this especially in *sermones* 261, 262, 263, 264, 265B, 265D, 265F, 377. Furthermore, *sermo* 263A provides an example of ecclesiological grace. Grace is therefore not only significantly present in these sermons, it is also the theological heart of their account of the soteriological significance of the

117. s. 264, 9-11.
118. s. 265, 10.
119. s. 265A, 8.
120. s. 265D, 6-7.
Easter event, and of the ascension in particular. Augustine does not, however, treat grace in a polemical way, as he does in the anti-Pelagian writings; rather, grace is here the foundation of the ascension as a salvation event as well as the foundation of its liturgical celebration.

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