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Saint Augustine on the Resurrection of Christ

TEACHING, RHETORIC, AND RECEPTION

Gerald O'Collins, SJ

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
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First Edition published in 2017

Impression: 1

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016956620

ISBN 978-0-19-879954-2

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Preface

The remarkable life of St Augustine of Hippo (354–430) spanned a period dense with debates about the personal identity and natures of Jesus Christ. The Christian Church passed one theological milestone after another as controversies led to (and followed) what the First Council of Nicaea (325), the First Council of Constantinople (381), the Council of Ephesus (431), and the Council of Chalcedon (451) taught about Christ. He is truly divine (Nicaea I); he is fully human (Constantinople I); his divinity and humanity, while not separated (Ephesus), are not confused (Chalcedon).

Before the time of Augustine's teaching and writing ministry and shortly after his death, bishops and others wrote notable tracts on Christ, such as the *De Incarnatione Verbi* by St Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373), the *Quod unus sit Christus* of Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444), and the *Tomus ad Flavianum* of St Leo the Great (d. 461). But Augustine never produced a particular tract which addressed the Christological issues that emerged in the fourth and fifth centuries. The most extensive passage on Christology comes in *The Trinity* (4.1–5).

To be sure, reflections on Jesus Christ turn up constantly in Augustine's more than 400 extant sermons (biblically rich, often rhetorically dazzling, and long neglected or even unknown), the 252 letters by him (plus forty-nine others addressed to him) that have survived, the *City of God*, *The Trinity*, his works against the Arian heresy, and other writings—not least his longest work, *Expositions of the Psalms*. He was the first to produce a complete commentary on the Psalms, which he expounded as the *vox ad Christum* (the word addressed to Christ), the *vox de Christo* (the word spoken about Christ), and the *vox Christi* (the word spoken by Christ).

Belief in Christ as the incarnate Son of God, who came to mediate between human beings and God through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension was an utterly fundamental condition for Augustine's faith and life. He showed a totally Christ-centred cast of mind. Christ gave meaning to his whole existence, through his being mysteriously united with Christ and the members of the one Body of Christ.

Preaching the message of Christ constituted the central core of Augustine's ministry exercised for those who already belonged to the Church and for others. Yet Augustine never fused into a complete theological work what he held to be the most significant features of his faith in Christ.

This absence of a theological treatise on Christ, along with further reasons, encouraged scholars to come at Augustine's theology from other angles. They devoted themselves rather to studying what he said about free will, grace, the interpretation of Scripture, original sin, predestination, the sacraments, the Trinity, and so forth. To be sure, some scholars have examined the teaching of Augustine on the incarnation, the passion of Christ, his ascension, the resurrection of the body in general, Christ's union with others in the 'Totus Christus (the whole Christ)', and Christological questions that come up in the context of studying the Holy Trinity.

But we still lack studies precisely on Christ's own resurrection from the dead. Very little attention has been directed to what Augustine preached and wrote about the rising of Christ himself and the questions it raises. Christ's resurrection hardly enters, for instance, what Goulven Madec wrote on 'Christus', in Cornelius Mayer (ed.), *Augustinus-Lexikon* (Basel: Schwabe, 1986–94), col. 845–908. The resurrection of Christ is ignored by Basil Studer, *The Grace of God and the Grace of Christ in Augustine of Hippo: Christocentrism or Theocentrism?*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1997). In Allan D. Fitzgerald (ed.), *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), William Mallard has nothing to say about the resurrection in his entry, 'Jesus Christ' (pp. 463–70), while Brian E. Daley's entry 'Resurrection' barely touches Christ's resurrection and attends rather to the resurrection of the body in general (pp. 722–3). In Robert Dodaro and George Lawless (eds.), *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner* (London: Routledge, 2000), Hubertus R. Drobner writes on 'Studying Augustine: An Overview of Recent Research' (pp. 18–34), but has little to report on Christology and nothing at all on the resurrection of Jesus (pp. 27–9).

This study aims to fill this important gap. We will present in Chapter 1 what can be found, here and there in the works of Augustine, about the central importance of faith in Jesus' resurrection from

the dead, the agency of Christ's own resurrection, the nature of his risen existence, the impact of his resurrection on others, and his mediatory role as the risen High Priest who is the invisible minister of the sacraments and eternally intercedes for sinful human beings.

Before being converted in 386 and then baptized at Easter 387, Augustine had proved himself to be outstanding as a practitioner of rhetoric, some would say the last great Roman rhetorician. As a Christian priest (391) and bishop (395), he gave himself unsparingly to the public role of preaching and teaching the message of the Gospel. His professional skills as a rhetorician came into play, not least when he justified believing in Christ risen from the dead. He appealed to evidence from created nature, human history, and the experiences and desires of his audience. He exercised his rhetoric not for its own sake, still less to achieve power over his hearers and readers, but to persuade them of the truth and life-giving nature of Easter faith. The second chapter of this book examines the case Augustine, secular rhetorician turned Christian apologist, made for the veracity of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

When it seems useful, Chapters 1 and 2 will evaluate Augustine's teaching on and apologetic for the resurrection in the light of later theology. For instance, his argument that for certain, observable historical effects, the only adequate cause is the resurrection of Jesus has continued under somewhat different forms.

The remarkable, three-volume *Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine* (Oxford University Press, 2013), edited by Karla Pollmann, has encouraged me to go further in recognizing how to retrieve and receive Augustine's thought. So too has Rowan Williams, who brings Augustine into conversation with such modern thinkers as Hannah Arendt, Reinhold Niebuhr, Martha Nussbaum, and Ludwig Wittgenstein (*On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016)). Hence Chapters 3 and 4 will set themselves (a) to illustrate the enduring significance of his teaching and apologetic and (b), where necessary, to update, correct, and supplement Augustine's view of Christ's resurrection.

Thus this book assesses Augustine's thought on Christ's resurrection and then brings him into conversation with later, modern discussion. The aim is to maintain a proper balance between (a) the exposition and (b) a critical reception of Augustine. The book is driven by this dual purpose often exemplified in the *Oxford Guide to the Historical*

Reception of Augustine. Over and over again that work shows how later authors, in areas other than Christ's resurrection, retrieved, adapted, and applied Augustine's teaching and rhetoric. My hope is to produce a cohesive monograph that does something similar for what he said and wrote on Jesus' rising from the dead.

Many years ago, after I delivered my first major lecture on Augustine, several leaders in Augustine studies suggested that I should have specified the dates of various homilies, letters, and other works and indicated at times the nature or length of the work cited. Hence this book includes such specifications. They illuminate, for instance, an even firmer stress by Augustine on the 'fleshly' reality of the resurrection of Christ (and others).

The recent publication by New City Press of good annotated translations of Augustine's works has made my study much easier. For a rich and up-to-date bibliography of works by Augustine and works on Augustine, readers can consult the abundant information provided by Joseph T. Kelley, *What Are They Saying About Augustine?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2014). For translation from the Bible, this book normally follows the New Revised Standard Version. At the end it includes a select bibliography of publications that concern the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the thought of Augustine and some modern authors. My warm thanks go to four anonymous readers (two for Oxford University Press and two for the Jesuit order). I dedicate my work to the memory of Henry Chadwick, teacher, mentor, and friend par excellence.

Jesuit Theological College, Parkville, Australia
31 July 2016

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List of Abbreviations

ABD	D. N. Freedman (ed.), <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> , 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992).
c. Faust.	<i>Contra Faustum Manichaeum</i> (<i>Answer to Faustus a Manichean</i>)
civ.	<i>De Civitate Dei</i> (<i>The City of God</i>)
doctr. Chr.	<i>De Doctrina Christiana</i> (<i>Teaching Christianity</i>)
en. Ps.	<i>Enarrationes in Psalmos</i> (<i>Expositions of the Psalms</i>)
ep.	<i>Epistolae</i> (<i>Letters</i>)
Io. ev. tr.	<i>Tractatus in Iohannis Evangelium</i> (<i>Homilies on the Gospel of John</i>)
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
Par. parr.	Parallel passage(s) in the Synoptic Gospels
PL	<i>Patrologia Latina</i> , ed. J. P. Migne, 221 volumes
REB	Revised English Bible
s.	<i>Sermones</i> (<i>Sermons</i>)
Trin.	<i>De Trinitate</i> (<i>The Trinity</i>)

1

The Resurrection of the Crucified Jesus

Augustine's Faith

Augustine never wrote a treatise on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Hence this chapter has no principal source but must draw on various works: *Answer to Faustus a Manichean*, *The City of God*, *Expositions of the Psalms*, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, *Letters*, *Sermons*, and *The Trinity*. Establishing what is significant in all this material, we will show how Augustine attended to seven major themes when presenting the resurrection of Christ.

(1) Belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the heart of Christian faith and sets Christians apart from Jews and others. (2) Like the Gospel of John, Augustine highlights Christ's active role in his own resurrection. (3) While Christ's risen existence was 'spiritual' and immortal, his flesh could be handled, and he could eat and drink, even though he did not need to do so. (4) Augustine seems reluctant to state clearly that, while joined to his resurrected 'members', Christ the head will sing with them the praises of God. (5) The risen Christ is both the pledge of coming resurrection for others, and the 'sacrament' effecting their being raised from sin and physical death. (6) The risen Christ is the mediator of new life, and (7) the true minister of the sacraments and the priest who eternally 'intercedes on our behalf'. In expounding these last three points, we will see how, when presenting Christ's resurrection, Augustine to some extent prioritizes *Christus pro nobis* over *Christus in se*.

The Resurrection as the Heart of Christian Faith

Over many years, Augustine highlighted belief in the resurrection of Jesus as the heart of Christian faith, a belief that sets Christians apart from Jews and others. In his *Expositions of the Psalms* (delivered between c.392 and c.420 AD), for example, he defined the faith of Christians in terms of the resurrection. Commenting on Psalm 101, he insisted:

The faith of Christians is not triumphant because they believe that Christ died but because they believe that Christ rose again. Even a pagan believes that he died...In what do you really take pride? You believe that Christ is risen and you hope that through Christ you will rise. This is why your faith is triumphant. (en. Ps. 101.7)

Having said that, Augustine at once quoted Paul: 'If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved' (Rom. 10: 9).¹

When commenting on Psalm 120, Augustine says something very similar. Christ's resurrection defines Christian faith and identity.

By the passion the Lord passed over from death to life; and opened a way for us who believe in his resurrection, that we too may pass over from death to life. It is no great thing to believe that Christ died: pagans and Jews, and all bad people (*iniqui*) believe that. All of them are sure that he died. The faith of Christians is in the resurrection of Christ. This is what matters to us (*hoc pro magno habemus*), that we believe that he rose from the dead.

Once more Augustine proceeds to quote Romans 10: 9 (en. Ps. 120.6).²

In *De Trinitate*, a masterpiece composed from c.400 to shortly after 420 AD, Augustine wrote in a similar vein: 'it is faith in its [the flesh of Christ's] resurrection that saves and justifies...it is the resurrection of the Lord's body that gives value to our faith...Even his enemies believe that that body died on the cross of pain, but they do not

¹ *Expositions of the Psalms* (99–120), trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), 67; see Trin. 2.29; *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), 118.

² *Expositions of the Psalms* (99–120), 514–15.