

# DEUS HUMILIS VENIT

## *Revelation of the love of a humble God*

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I HAVE BEEN struck by an idea of St. Augustine's that I find especially rich for our reflection: the humility of God as a quality of God, made visible especially in the Incarnation. This year of mercy that we are living, as well as a reflection on mercy in general, could lead us to consider only a human attitude and to look for its foundation in Sacred Scripture and in Church tradition. Augustine's intuition, however, leads us to look at a quality which is proper to God and which God communicates to us not just in the form of a teaching or as a practice to imitate but as an element that constitutes the divinity and which finds its full realization in the meeting of the human and the divine that happens in the Incarnation. To this movement from above downwards, there is a corresponding movement from below upwards:

Weights are of two types. [...] Brothers, where does fire tend to go and where does water tend to go? Fire rises, seeking its place; as water seeks its place driven by its weight. The rock moves downward and likewise the wood, pillars and the earth with which these houses are built—because they belong to that category of things which by their weight tend to seek a lower level. It is clear, therefore, that they have their foundation below, because by their weight they are driven downwards. If there is nothing to hold them up, everything falls down because everything tends to go towards the ground. The foundation, then, of things they tend to move downwards is below them. But the Church of God, even though it is located below, tends towards heaven. That indeed is where our foundation is located, the Lord Jesus Christ who is seated at the right hand of the Father.<sup>1</sup>

The reflections that we will make here have,

on the one hand, a Christological and soteriological character and, on the other hand, a truly spiritual character. This is the way Augustine's theological reflection is, and in general that of the other Fathers of the Church, for whom theology is always done in an ecclesial context, that is to say in a context of spiritual animation.

I believe it to be quite unnecessary to introduce Augustine to you. His life story is well known, at least in reference to the first part of that life, the part that is told in the *Confessions*. The second part as well, the part that corresponds roughly to his episcopacy, is rather well known, since it includes an important number of works, most of which have survived until today. From all of this we get the idea that we are in the presence of one of the most influential theologians of all of Christian antiquity. Of course, we do not want to do injustice to anyone and we can say that our bishop gives us the synthesis of the Latin tradition that preceded him, takes up a good part of the Greek tradition and, with his particular genius, initiates a new theological reflection that would have a decisive influence on Western theology up to today.

It is also important to note that Augustine's theological work has a very pronounced Christological accent: Jesus Christ, Lord and Savior, the way and our native land, the sole mediator between God and the human race, is present in all his writings, even in his early philosophical writings. This came about not just because of the different controversies he had to deal with but also, and above all, because of his personal and pastoral concerns. As we know, his conversion came about through an important experience with the

Manicheans and his moving encounter with Ambrose at Milan from which he adopted contemplation of Christ as *auctoritas* and *via ad patriam*. By scrutinizing his inner questions and comparing them with his personal experience he developed the idea of an 'invincible' grace which is the definitive step in bringing man to fulfilment.<sup>2</sup>

Augustine was a man of profound questions and in trying to answer these questions, both for himself and for others of his time, he arrived at a particular understanding of human existence than has indelibly marked theological reflection. In confronting the Donatist movement, which claimed to be the one true Church in the midst of so many African Churches, Augustine made reference to the contemplation and the experience of Christ: if we say that Christ baptizes, it means that the presence of Christ in the Church guarantees the holiness of the sacraments and the communion of saints. The Church, united to Christ, constitutes the *Christus totus*.

After 412, Augustine had to face the problems that originated in Pelagianism and here again he looks to Christ to formulate his argument: Christ is not only an *exemplum*, a model of Christian life but also an *adiutorium*, a help, a source of grace, who heals and makes grow in love and truth. At the same time, because of the political difficulties of the time, Augustine tried to explain what can reasonably be expected of *tempora christiana*: his great apologetic work *De Civitate Dei* is again centered on the face of Christ, the sole mediator, always present in history. During his last years Augustine had to deal with the case of Leporio, who has come to be considered like Nestorius *ante litteram*, and refute at the same time the Arians who had arrived in Africa. Against these new adversaries he underlined the meaning of *unitas personae* in Christ.

The allusions we are making are too brief to illustrate completely Augustine's Christology but they do serve to show how



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important it was for him to put Christ and the salvation he won at the center, even with all the difficulties that such a synthesis brings. These difficulties come from the following facts: from the influence of the rhetoric of that time which loved contrasts and metaphorical language; from the complexity of Soteriology itself whose themes like reconciliation, victory, healing, *etc.* had become interlaced with the growing importance of the Bible which had difficulty with philosophical approaches; from the present problems which hindered Augustine from finding a truly personal synthesis.

The difficulties mentioned explain, perhaps, why few scholars have tried to develop an overall presentation of Augustinian soteriology. Many have been content to elaborate one aspect or the other, perhaps considered more important, such as redemption, mediation, the *Totus Christus*, *etc.*

### 1. The mediation of Christ

The *Enchiridion*, or *The Manuel on faith, hope and charity*, which Augustine wrote to Laurence from 421 on, thus during his last years, is an attempt to make a *resume* of the important points of Christian faith, as they are to be found in the proclamation of that faith.<sup>3</sup> At the center of this *compendium* is to be found Jesus Christ, because 'Christ is the indisputable and exclusive foundation of Catholic faith,'<sup>4</sup> and only through him can one leave sin to be reconciled with God, or rather

to follow the way that leads from being far from God to being near to God.<sup>5</sup>

Augustine is especially effective when he recalls the reasons for the Incarnation: the healing of pride, a call back to God, an example of obedience, a model of grace, proof of the resurrection, victory over the devil;<sup>6</sup> all of these themes have their focus in the centrality of Christ's mediation.

For we could not be redeemed, even through the one Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, if He were not also God. Now when Adam was created, he, being a righteous man, had no need of a mediator. But when sin had placed a wide gulf between God and the human race, it was expedient that a Mediator, who alone of the human race was born, lived, and died without sin, should reconcile us to God, and procure even for our bodies a resurrection to eternal life, in order that the pride of man might be exposed and cured through the humility of God; that man might be shown how far he had departed from God, when God became incarnate to bring him back; that an example might be set to disobedient man in the life of obedience of the God-Man; that the fountain of grace might be opened by the Only-begotten taking upon Himself the form of a servant, a form which had no antecedent merit; that an earnest of that resurrection of the body which is promised to the redeemed might be given in the resurrection of the Redeemer; that the devil might be subdued by the same nature which it was his boast to have deceived, and yet man not glorified, lest pride should again spring up; and, in fine, with a view to all the advantages which the thoughtful can perceive and describe, or perceive without being able to describe, as flowing from the transcendent mystery of the person of the Mediator<sup>7</sup>.

The mediation of Christ, and through him the humble coming down of God to the human level are central themes in Augustine's theology and spirituality which are also expressed in another way when Augustine speaks of *auctoritas*, *Christus praesens in Ecclesia*, *adiutorium et exemplum, universalis via salutis*.

The holy bishop's reflection does not only

have its origin in the formation and building up of the ecclesial community but also in the difficulties of a philosophical nature which he finds, for example, in Platonism which has a difficult relationship with the Incarnation,<sup>8</sup> and because of this, keeping himself firmly bound to the Bible, he understands *mediator* as *redemptor* and *reconciliator*, and gives great importance to the reflection on Christ-according-to-the-flesh.<sup>9</sup> In other texts, fewer in number, Augustine insists on the fact that Christ is to be found between God the Father and human beings, between the creator and created things, and is, therefore, at the same time God and man.

The Platonic temptation consists in favoring the divine side only, and therefore not only underrating the human component, but also considering the divine part as the only and principal part. It is evident that this is not just a problem of the first centuries but one that touches every epoch, in the temptation to distinguish a good side and a bad side in man, in the Church and in the world.

Augustine had received a great boost in his conversion from Platonism, when, at a certain point in his maturation, he realized that this sort of philosophy could lead him to a dualism which is foreign to Catholic faith. We find a clear indication early on in *contra Academicos*:

I firmly hold that I should not distance myself from the authority of Christ because one cannot find any other authority which is more valid. In relation to what should be argued with philosophical thought, I am confident in finding in the Platonic philosophers themes that are not contrary to Holy Scripture.<sup>10</sup>

It is clear from this passage that Augustine was acquainted with Platonism but that he did not depend on it since his relationship is dialectical: the *auctoritas* is Christ and the Platonic philosophers are to be read and their position retained only in as much as they are not in disharmony with the Catholic Church's own faith.

We can try to express his thought in a few words: in paradise, human beings, created in the image of God, enjoyed direct illumination from God and had God as a friend.<sup>11</sup> The sin of pride, however, created a distance between God and us: we, separated from the divine Word, went about looking for our own egotistical good instead of the common good (*corruptio naturae*) and exercised 'extraversion' instead of introspection (*corruptio intellectus*), desiring inferior rather than superior things (*corruptio voluntatis*).<sup>12</sup>

We were no longer able to look up: the eye of our heart lowered our gaze towards the ground. A return to paradise, to the intellectual world, was closed to us who were now excluded from illumination. It was necessary that God's authority call us back to intelligence, under an external form, that is to say the grace of the authority of Christ, of Scripture and of the Church.

The incarnate Word, which is the greatest sign of divine things and then the authority of the Bible and of the preaching of the Church, invite us to return to ourselves, to find again, in our own heart, eternal truth. Scripture and preaching give birth to and nurture faith which, from its part, making charity operative, leads the mind to understanding. This ascent, while causing one to advance in a continual purification of the mind, never reaches its goal on this earth. Only in heaven, in union with the angels, will we enjoy the vision of eternal truth. Thus we advance, by means of science, to wisdom,<sup>13</sup> until we are purified and completely united with Christ-God, towards whom we are oriented, even during this life, through the vehicle of Christ-Man.

The ascent towards God is not made only *per viam fidei*, through faith nourished by the Bible, but also *per viam rationis* by means of the traces of truth that reason discovers in creation. We can say of this vision of salvation that it contains Platonic echoes: it contains both Christian and Platonic

elements or, so to speak, Platonic elements which have been 'baptized.' Among others we would point out: introspection or a turning towards one's self; illumination of the mind and of the heart; purification of the mind and the healing of the eyes; ascent towards the blessed life; the metaphysical dimension (God, evil, good). On the other hand there are elements coming from Christian tradition: Christ who wins our admiration and illumines the mind; Christ the sole teacher, whether internal or external, in the authority of the Church or in the beauty of creation; Christ who helps us with grace and who shows the way through example.<sup>14</sup>

## **2. The revelation of salvation in the incarnation of the Word**

In *De Trinitate*, as we have seen above, Augustine presents Christ as *Scientia* and *Sapientia*<sup>15</sup>: if we look at the history of salvation, the Incarnation, which is the moment of the union between God and humanity, constitutes the greatest grace; on the level of eternity, the Word of God represents the highest truth. From the moment that Christ is knowledge and wisdom at the same time, the one who reveals God in the flesh to instill in us the faith that purifies, he will also make us see God in eternity.

This way of presenting things seems to be difficult and speculative but in fact our bishop is expressing a line of vision that is very familiar, the idea of the revealing dimension of the incarnate Word. The theme of *Deus qui apparuit in carne*, in fact, was central from the beginning of Augustine's work. In particular it characterizes certain sermons on Christmas and Epiphany in which he repeats the word *manifestatio*<sup>16</sup>. This concept is at the foundation of his doctrine on *missio* in the fourth book of *De Trinitate*: after having explained the meaning of incarnation, of the death and resurrection of Christ, Augustine declares:

The Son is not properly said to have been sent

in as much as He is begotten of the Father; but in that the Word made flesh appeared to the world.<sup>17</sup>

The *missio* of the Incarnation, then, is distinguished from all the other divine missions: from the theophanies recorded in the Old Testament, from the appearance of the Holy Spirit, and from the spiritual presence of the Spirit or the Word. The very purpose of the Incarnation was double: to reveal what God wants to be for humankind and to reveal what God expects of humans. Here the theme of the humility and of the mercy of God, expressed in the title of this work, finds its motivation and theological explanation. Behind this theme there is a great theological and spiritual richness.

The Incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, from conception to glorification, constitutes first of all the supreme revelation of God's love: a *demonstratio* and *commendatio* of love. The Incarnation also shows the humility of God and proves the unconditional love of God for us and the definitive overcoming of all human pride. The revelation of the love of a humble God, on the other hand, demands that we love God and each other without pride. It also leads us to have confidence in divine goodness, and even invites us to be humble ourselves, because only in humility can we recognize that God is love. The Incarnation of the Word was thus a manifestation of the humility of God and at the same time an invitation to love God in humility and, because of God, all people.

The Incarnation shows the incapacity of sinful humans to rediscover with our own freedom, certainly not destroyed but corrupted, divine justice, showing not only the need for grace, but also the nature of grace. The same grace, in fact, through which Jesus became the Son of God, communicates to all who believe and become baptized his divine sonship and sanctification by the Holy Spirit.

Finally, the Incarnation of the Son of God

is a *demonstratio immortalitatis*: faith finds here the proof that God intends to free us from death and, because of this, becomes a reason to hope. Just as God, who is immortal, became a mortal man out of love, we should no longer fear death, especially because of the fact that the resurrection of Christ has shown how deep are now the roots of our immortality.<sup>18</sup>

In the Incarnation of the Word took place the revelation of the love of a just and humble God, of the free grace of divine adoption in Christ and of our eternal destiny. Such a revelation is not only an *admonitio* for a faith that purifies, nor just a reason for hope nor just a heavenly communication of the intention of God to save, but also includes a teaching about the way we must follow to reach salvation. This teaching, which we can classify as moral, appears in both the words and the deeds of Jesus, in his *magisterium*<sup>19</sup> and in his *exemplum*<sup>20</sup>.

In this regard, the theme of Christ the doctor is particularly revealing: Christ, by means of his doctrine and especially by means of his example, heals the sicknesses of sin, in particular from the contamination of original sin and from the sickness of pride<sup>21</sup>.

It is also to be noted, in relation to the concept of *exemplum*, that this does not mean just a model to be imitated, but a reason for hope: he does not limit himself to being a model to imitate but is also, in a certain sense, a help: he serves as a precedent, a demonstration of what is possible, the guarantee that it can be repeated. We find this meaning in the expression *exemplum resurrectionis*:

The resurrection of the body of the Lord is shown to belong to the mystery of our own inner resurrection, where, after He had risen, He says to the woman, Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my Father (Jn 20,17); with which mystery the apostle's words agree, where he says, If you then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sits on the right hand of God; set your thoughts on

things above (Col 3,1-2). For not to touch Christ, unless when He had ascended to the Father, means not to have thoughts of Christ after a fleshly manner. Again, the death of the flesh of our Lord contains a type of the death of our outer man, since it is by such suffering most of all that He exhorts His servants that they should not fear those who kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul (Mt 10,28). Wherefore the apostle says, That I may fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh (Col 1,24). And the resurrection of the body of the Lord is found to contain a type of the resurrection of our outward man, because He says to His disciples, Handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones, as you see me have (Lc 24,39). And one of the disciples also, handling His scars, exclaimed, My Lord and my God! (Gv 20,24.28). And whereas the entire integrity of that flesh was apparent, this was shown in that which He had said when exhorting His disciples: There shall not a hair of your head perish (Lc 21,18). For how comes it that first is said, Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my Father; and how comes it that before He ascends to the Father, He actual-ly is touched by the disciples: unless because in the former the mystery of the inner man was intimated, in the latter a type was given of the outer man?<sup>22</sup>

### ***3. Imitation of the humble Christ***

The coming down of the divine into human history, the emptying of the Word, to use a well-known Pauline expression, is the paradigmatic model and the source of humility in the Christian disciple. Christian humility is thus much more than a virtue that God invites us to practice; it is the true and proper way that the Word comes close to us and invites us to use as a model in our life. Augustine often presents humility together with the exhortation in the Gospel of Matthew: "Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart" (Mt 11,29).<sup>23</sup> Thus the way of humility is, above all, the way of God and our life is in response to God's initiative. The humility of Christ determines for each person the road to return to God. In a famous letter to Dioscorus,

a young Greek intellectual, Augustine raises humility to the level of a condition and the basis of Christian living:

In that way the first part is humility; the second, humility; the third, humility: and this I would continue to repeat as often as you might ask direction, not that there are no other instructions which may be given, but because, unless humility precede, accompany, and follow every good action which we perform, being at once the object which we keep before our eyes, the support to which we cling, and the monitor by which we are restrained, pride wrests wholly from our hand any good work on which we are congratulating ourselves<sup>24</sup>.

Humility has many dimensions which move one from a new discovery of one's self to a deeper communion with others. Augustine alludes to the distinction between the grace of the humility proper to a beginner to that of a more advanced or deeper humility. The former implies an understanding of self and an honest confrontation with one's own sinfulness. In this "just means" between "desperation" (low esteem of self) on one hand, and "presumption" (excessive esteem of self) on the other hand, humility implies a turning within so as to recognize the need of constant grace from God<sup>25</sup>.

The more mature form of humility culminates in a going out of self, towards others, in a way that we would call misericordia. Once we see, in the light of Christ's humility, what we truly are, we are led to practice mercy in relation to our neighbor, according to the example and the strength of Christ<sup>26</sup> Augustine holds that the humility of Christ is the model and source of human perfection:

You will be humble only if you listen to the One who became humble for you. Learn from Christ what you do not learn from others: in him is to be found the rule of humility. The one who draws close to him is first formed through humility in order to be honored in praise.<sup>27</sup>

Augustine is convinced that a knowledge of Jesus Christ includes an understanding of his humility because Jesus Christ, first of all, shows us complete docility to God: he is the

archetype and the master of humility<sup>28</sup>. While the first kind of humility is centered on a true knowledge of one's self and is appropriate for the created order, since it underlines the ontological situation of limitation and mortality proper to the human being, so too the existential experience of one's sinfulness, the second and more radical type of humility is relational and Christological. This belongs more properly to the order of redemption in which created beings find a new identity established in social terms and rooted in the *kenosis*. The most complete human expression of humility, however, is found in the giving of one's self completely, on the model of the *kenosis* or effusion of divine love in the incarnation and in the passion.

The humble giving of one's self finds its highest model in the washing of the feet: humbling himself before the apostles, Christ proves that his love is concrete, tangible and is not afraid of contact with the filthy parts of humanity:

We have learned, brethren, humility from the Highest; let us, as humble, do to one another what He, the Highest, did in His humility. Great is the commendation we have here of humility: and brethren do this to one another in turn, even in the visible act itself, when they treat one another with hospitality; for the practice of such humility is generally prevalent, and finds expression in the very deed that makes it discernible<sup>29</sup>.

Augustine holds that Christ, with his actions, establishes a lofty model for the practice of humility. Such a practice does not consist in a simple, formal call to perform the liturgical ritual of the washing of the feet but is, rather, the existential path to accomplish: in the concrete offering of self to others, the Christian becomes the presence of Christ in the world. The humility of Christ is repeated in

the flesh through this concrete giving of self. It is an attitude that demands practice and growth.

Augustine explains that the rejection and persecution of Christ was not an occasional occurrence. The members of his Body share with Him the suffering that redeems. The humble Christ, then, continues to be identified with those who suffer persecution and poverty:

And so, as long as we are here below, we give food to Christ who is hungry, we give drink to him when he is thirsty, we clothe him when he is naked, we shelter him when he is a pilgrim, we visit him when he is sick. These things are part of the roughness of the journey. This is the way we should live in the present pilgrimage in which Christ is needy: he needs his followers even though he is filled with everything in himself. But the one who is needy in his followers, while he is rich in everything, will draw to himself all who are needy.<sup>30</sup>

The insistence of Augustine in the fact that Christ is to be discovered among the poor is the sign of a development in his thought which takes him from a Neoplatonic search for the Logos within the human heart, to the search for Christ outside, in the world, especially among the most vulnerable.

Augustine describes the humble as empty vessels, in the sense that they are emptied of egoism and an attachment to earthly things and ready to be filled with the Holy Spirit, who is like water in search of a humble heart: 'The Spirit fills the humble because he finds them ready to receive him'<sup>31</sup>. Augustine clarifies that the grace of God, like the rain, batters the mountain of pride and is collected in the humble valley below. Just as the valley is ready to be filled with the rain that falls from the hill, the humble soul receives the effusion of the Holy Spirit: the more it is docile and receptive, the more the Spirit fills it.

## NOTES

1. *En. in Ps.* 29,2,10.
2. We make reference to the studies of Lettieri who makes the difficult comparison

in the passage from the first to the second part of *De Doctrina Christiana* the proof of a radical change in doctrine, of a radical yet

not explicit *retractatio* of the initial premise of the first part which were never brought to conclusion and then mysteriously taken up again in the last years of his life, with the hypothesis of 'una vera e propria nuova conversion di Agostino, determinante una crisi decisiva e quindi una radicale rifondazione della sua teologia' (G. Lettieri, *La metamorfosi del De doctrina christiana di Agostino*, in *Cristianesimo nella storia* 21 (2000), pp. 273-274). The proposals of Lettieri (from the article: 'La crisi del De doctrina christiana di Agostino, in *Cristianesimo nella storia*' 18 (1997), pp. 1-60, up to the volume: *L'altro Agostino. Ermeneutica e retorica della grazia dalla crisi alla metamorfosi del De doctrina christiana*, Brescia 2000) have made it possible to open a wide-ranging debate among scholars on the motives behind the taking up again, after a lapse of thirty years, of this important and demanding text.

3. Cfr *Retr.* 2,63.

4. *Ench.* 1,5.

5. Cfr *Ench.* 13,41.

6. Cfr *Ench.* 28, 108.

7. *Ench.* 28, 108

8. Cfr *Trin.* 13,19,24.

9. Cfr *Trin.* 1,7,14 and the texts of an anti-Arian nature: *En. Ps.* 29,2,1; *Conf.* 10,43-68.

10. *C. Acad.* 3,20,43. Precisely when he was rereading *Contra Academicos*, forty years later in *Retractions* (1,1-4), Augustine gave his final and definitive judgement on his previous use of Platonism, unhappy with having praised Plato and his followers too highly, while remaining convinced that many Platonic doctrines were in harmony with Christianity or could easily be harmonized with it.

11. *Gn. c. Man.* 2,4,5: *Ante peccatum... Deus... irrigabat eam fonte interiore loquens in*

*intellectu eius, ut non extrinsecus verba exciperet tamquam de supradictis nubibus pluviam, sed fonte suo, hoc est de intimis suis manante veritate satiaretur.*

12. Cfr R. Holte, *Béatitude et sagesse. Saint Augustin et le problème de la fin de l'homme dans la philosophie ancienne*, Paris-Worcester 1962, 335-343.

13. *Trin.* 13,19,24: *Tendimus per scientiam ad sapientiam.*

14. Cfr R. Holte, *Béatitude et sagesse*, 329-333. Cfr *Trin.* 4,3,6: *Una ergo mors nostri Salvatoris duabus mortibus nostris saluti fuit, et una eius resurrectio duas nobis resurrectiones praestitit cum corpus eius in utraque re, id est et in morte et in resurrectione, et in sacramento interioris hominis nostri et exemplo exterioris medicinali quadam convenientia ministratum est.*

15. *Trin.* 13,16,21-19,24.

16. Cfr *Serm.* 201,1; *Tract.* 11o. 1,1.

17. *Trin.* 4,20,28.

18. Cfr the theme of *exemplum resurrectionis*: *Ver. rel.* 16,23; *Trin.* 4,13,17; *Serm.* 263,1

19. *C. Acad.* 3,19,43; *agon.christ.* 11,12.

20. *Quaest.div.* 83,25.44; *en. Ps.* 90,1,1;

*util.cred.* 33; *ep.* 137,12, and especially *Ver.rel.* 16,32.

21. Cfr *Serm.* 77,11

22. *Trin.* 4,3,6.

23. Cfr *conf.* 7, 9, 14; *Io. ev. tr.* 25, 18; *civ. Dei* 14, 13.

24. *Ep.* 118, 3, 22

25. *Conf.* 7, 20, 26; *Io. ev. Tr.* 25, 16.

26. *Io. ev. tr.* 58, 4; *serm.* 250, 4-5; 340A, 5

27. *Serm.* 68, 11.

28. *Magister humilitatis: Io. Ev. Tr.* 25, 16.

29. *Io. ev. tr.* 58, 4.

30. *Serm.* 236, 3.

31. *Serm.* 270, 6