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THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF BIBLICAL EXEGESIS IN SAINT AUGUSTINE'S WORK 'ON CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE' AND ITS REFLECTION IN 'THE CONFESSIONS'

Thesis summary

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Saint Augustine's (Aurelius Augustinus, 354–430) comprehensive hermeneutical work *'On Christian Doctrine'* (*De Doctrina Christiana* – hereinafter referred to as *DDCh*) stands out in cultural-historical terms amongst the countless writings of this great Western Church Father, although he has written several other works that surpass the four books of *DDCh* in terms of length and the loftiness or uniqueness of their subject matter. One such work – the one that fits best the described characteristics and is the best known and most frequently cited among a broader literary audience – is the *Confessions*. Accordingly, over the more than 1,600 years since their creation, a vast amount of literature has been published on both works – and especially on the latter – by authors of varying levels of expertise and intellectual orientation. In this vast realm of literature, the primary and fundamental characteristic of this dissertation is that, beyond a general examination of the works mentioned, I have set out to demonstrate the connection between the two during the discussion of their content, specifically on the basis of the various epistemological and hermeneutical themes, which are whether directly or indirectly presented in them.

In my view, this connection between the two works can be based on two main points of contact. One relates to the circumstances of their composition: Augustine began writing both works roughly at the same time, in the final years of the 4th century, and so the two works may have influenced one another not only in terms of content but also regarding to their making as well. Consequently, the other point of connection – in terms of internal relationships – is provided by the epistemological background, as well as the theory and practice of biblical exegesis. Indeed, a characteristic feature of the intellectual background to these two works that their starting point is close in time and, in my view, is preceded by Augustine's turning point in the theology of grace generally dated to the beginning of his episcopal ministry, and more precisely to around 396. This – relatively sudden – elevation of the role of grace in Augustine's thought may therefore have represented an important epistemological consideration in relation to the theory and practice of scriptural interpretation set out in these two works.

These two points of connection also helped me to narrow down this extremely broad field of research. It is important to note here, first and foremost, that the writing of the *DDCh* was interrupted for some 30 years before the completion of Book III, meaning that Book IV, which deals with the presentation of truths (*de modo proferendi*) uncovered through textual interpretation, falls entirely outside the period covered by the section directly concerned with hermeneutics (*de modo inveniendi*) and the phase during which the *Confessions* were being written. Therefore, I have refrained from a detailed discussion of Book IV of the *DDCh*; however, I have made the concession of taking a closer look at the final section of Book III,

which – together with Book IV – was also written posteriorly at the end of the 420s. The main reason for this inclusion was to render visible in its entirety Augustine's theory of biblical interpretation set out in the *DDCh*, which, 30 years later, was essentially supplemented only with a review of the hermeneutical rules contained in the *'Liber regularum'* written not long before by Tyconius (died c. 390), who was associated with the Donatists in North Africa. However, it is precisely the nature of this supplementary section that emerges as a significant factor in the genesis of the work as a whole. In my view, the dilemma of engaging in dialogue with a non-Catholic author within the tense ecclesiastical climate of North Africa at the time may have contributed to the decision of the then-new Bishop Augustine to suspend the writing of the *DDCh* in the late 390s. It follows, therefore, that the *Confessions* – written around the same time as the first part of the *DDCh* – is also examined fundamentally from the perspective of biblical exegesis and the epistemology associated with it.

Despite the points of connection highlighted above, the two works differ completely in terms of genre and nature, which has had a significant influence on the structure and arrangement of the content of this doctoral thesis: following the introduction to the two works, in the discussion of their individual books I have adhered fundamentally to the linearity and continuity of their development. Then, I seeked to relate this arrangement to the mutually dependent and complementary functions of *theoria* and *praxis*, based on the differing fundamental orientations of the two works, although in this respect we find a degree of overlap in both works. Thus, whilst the *DDCh* addresses the themes of classical *paideia*, cognition and hermeneutics through a scientific methodology, the *Confessions* explores these themes through personal experience, reflection and a continuous, multi-layered interpretation of the *First Creation Narrative* (Gen 1,1–2,4). As regards the dynamic relationship between the linear exposition of the two works, I have mainly drawn attention to the thematic parallels and overlaps by means of cross-references. Overall, this approach offers the opportunity for a more thorough analysis of literary sources, perhaps at the expense of a thematically more argumentative and dynamic discussion.

Hence, the subject of research is essentially Augustine's theory (*theoria*) of the interpretation of Scripture, which begins by laying down the foundations of faith and morality (*res*) in the Book I of the *DDCh*. The Bishop of Hippo essentially sets out the rule of Christian faith (*regula fidei*) and the meaning of and the twofold commandment of love (*gemina caritas* – cf. Mt 22,37–39) from a teleological point of view, which provide reliable points of reference for the exegesis both in terms of content and in practice. This is followed by the theory of signs (*signa* – semiotics) in the Books II–III, the aim of which is to ensure that the reader of the Bible

has the most balanced relationship with them, both literal and figurative, and which concerns ultimately the identification of various signs and the exploration of their meanings as comprehensively as possible within their respective interpretative frameworks.

In Book II, Augustine focuses primarily on the scientific nature of biblical exegesis: firstly, he situates the biblical signs within the universal system of signs, describing their general characteristics, then he defines the limits and scope of the pursuit of science at a supernatural level in an *excursus* and establishes the Bible as both a scientific source and an object of research laying down its canon. Finally, after having dealt with the direct linguistic problematics of the biblical text promoting simultaneously the use of original languages and that of the various, "official" and "unofficial" translations, in another *excursus* the Bishop of Hippo classifies and evaluates the different scientific and pseudo-scientific doctrines and institution from a sheer Christian point of view and assigns them according to their proportional utility to the service of biblical interpretation. In this way, similarly to Saint Basil of Caesarea († 379) and Saint Gregory of Nazianzus († 390) Augustine shows openness to the cultural and scientific heritage of pagans with the due distinction (*diiudicatio*) and moderation (*„Ne quid nimis!"* – Terentius, *Andria*, I,1,60–61).

In Book III, Augustine deepens the theory of signs within the system of Christian revelation. Having discussed the unknown (*ignota*) signs, he moves on to the problem of ambiguity (*ambiguitas*), and he takes the ambiguous literal signs as a starting point reflecting on a common problem that frequently arose in the editions of the texts from that period. The ambiguity of certain statements stemmed, indeed, purely from an inadequate division of the text (*distinctio*) or, where this is lacking or uncertain, from its prosody and intonation (*pronuntiatio*), with the result that the reader fails to relate appropriately to things (*res*) presented by the text. In brief, the method of solving such difficulties is essentially based on a proper and accurate understanding of the text's immediate and broader – even theological – context, in which it may be useful occasionally to compare the text with the original or with other reliable editions.

Then, the Bishop of Hippo seeks to apply these preliminary terms to the interpretation of ambiguous signs (*signa ambigua*), where the essential task is primarily to determine whether a given scriptural passage should be understood in its literal sense (*verba propria*) or as figurative, metaphorical or allegorical speech (*verba translata*). This may ultimately be regarded as the *status quaestionis* of the entire book. Accordingly, within the second and much more extensive section of Book III, Augustine is concerned not so much with interpreting the various figurative expressions according to their types, but rather with the applicability of *allegoresis* to individual passages and with distinguishing between passages to be interpreted literally and those to be

interpreted allegorically. For this reason, he distinguishes between allegory as a figure of speech (*tropus*) consciously applied by the writer, and *allegoresis* as a method of interpretation available to the reader. Augustine does not wish to deal in detail with the linguistic devices that add nuance to the text, as he regards a sufficient knowledge of these as part of general education within the subject of *grammatica*. In contrast, he devotes particular attention to allegorical interpretations, seeking above all to establish a balance and unity between the author's intention, the possible readings, and the levels of meaning within the text.

Therefore, Augustine sets out 'paths' (*viae*) which may provide guidance on striking a balance by giving due consideration to the literal meaning and correctly applying figurative interpretations: the former is based on the historicity of divine revelation, the latter is rooted in the biblical and ecclesiastical tradition. These both thus are connected in the life of the Church and in her doctrine regarding the faith and morals: the statements written in the Bible or assumptions deduced from it by the reader, if their truth is *sufficiently* proven by these *a priori* foundations and the logic, can be equally accepted without causing any harm in the souls and trouble in the Church, which is a requirement of authentic love. Considering all this, the critical review and adoption of Tyconius's rules in the concluding section of Book III can be seen as both a validation and a broadening of Augustine's approach, particularly in the direction of figurative interpretations.

In light of all this, the Bishop of Hippo seems to be closer to the Alexandrian and respectively Origenian exegetical tradition, however, correcting this in favour of the Antiochene tradition, he places greater emphasis on the literal sense, rejecting the ranking of different layers of meaning, whereby the text must always be attributed not only a literal meaning but also a more elevated, spiritual message. Behind analytics – that is, the examination of the elements of a text – there is therefore a kind of synthetic or 'synoptic' perspective that aims at unifying the various levels of meaning and interpretations on the basis of the revelation entrusted to the Church.

In the second part of the dissertation, I turn to an examination of how the theory of knowledge and that of signs (*theoria*) unfolds through the Augustine's personal spiritual development, as presented in the Books I–IX of the chronologically contemporaneous *Confessions*, which process is sealed by the exegetical practice (*praxis*) of the Books X–XIII in the last part of this prestigious work. In this way, I aimed at demonstrating how the theoretical considerations and the practice of the *Confessions* reflect and go beyond the theory of the *DDCh*.

Accordingly, it is the above-mentioned unifying perspective that Augustine emphasises in the *Confessions* when he rejects that kind of appeal to the intention of the human author of the biblical text (*sensus auctoris*) which is willing to recognise only a single interpretation – be it literal or allegorical – as authentic, while denying the validity of any other interpretation, even if they are well-founded in the Christian teaching. According to the Bishop of Hippo, this restricts the scope of the Holy Spirit's action to the confines of human conventions during the complex process of communication and may even trivialise it by means of an easy allegorical interpretation – a danger to which he drew attention in Book III of the *DDCh* in connection with biblical passages that appear scandalous at first glance. Furthermore, in Augustine's view, this approach, which aims to create unity in the short term, also proves to be bold, arrogant and authoritarian, which runs counter to the spirit of true science, since the researcher's opinion and person come to be regarded as more important than the truth itself, which, however, no one can lay claim to as their own. In order to avoid this epistemological impasse, the Bishop of Hippo regards as authoritative, first and foremost, the intention of the primary Author of Scripture (*sensus Auctoris*) – that is, the Holy Spirit who inspired it – as well as the ultimate content of revelation: the Word made flesh for the salvation of humankind, who came to serve others humbly (cf. Mt 20,28; Mk 10,45). This attitude of Christ (cf. Phil 2,1–11) must also be reflected in the exegesis, and it is this ultimate unifying principle by which Augustine, in the final books of the *Confessions*, links the literal exposition of the first verses of the *First Creation Narrative* with the allegorical interpretation of these and the subsequent verses.

Ultimately, the deepest foundation of these hermeneutical connections is none other than the supernatural dimension of faith in human cognition and in a corresponding way of life, both of which presuppose the effective operation of grace. It is principally the latter that Augustine honours in the *Confessions*, the fully developed insights of which are already present in the *DDCh*. In fact, following his conversion, Augustine began to view human life from a supernatural perspective, and, on the basis of Christian cosmology and eschatology, he subordinated all created things (*res*) and all human knowledge to the experience and attainment of a happy life, which is rooted in communion with God and finds its fulfilment in the undisturbed, complete and eternal enjoyment of that (*fruitio Dei*). He also supported this recognition in his *Confessions*, in which he analysed the path of human knowledge on the basis of his personal experiences, and – albeit not in a systematic framework, as in Book II of the *DDCh* – he also evaluated the classical sciences (*septem artes liberales*) and other intellectual works in the light of divine revelation. Through the example of himself and his mother, Saint Monica (died in 387) he illustrates the relativity of worldly knowledge and benefits, contrasting

them with the knowledge and grace received in the Church, as well as with eternal life fulfilled in God. The true place of knowledge and healing is therefore the Church, which every other foundation and institution (*institutiones*) may support and follow, but cannot replace; and Christ is the Truth (*veritas* – cf. Jn 14,6) and its Teacher (*magister* – cf. Mt 23,8) as well as the true Medicine (*medicina*) and the heavenly Physician (*medicus*), who alone is able to convince man in his soul of the Truth, to strengthen his weak and sin-prone will by directing it towards the Supreme Good (*summum bonum*) through the path of love, and to make him holy and perfect (cf. 1Pt 5,10).