

Choice in Augustine 's ecclesiology

The study of an ancient ecclesiology as that of Augustine leads to some surprising conclusions. One of the most important of these conclusions—in my view—is that we have a greater freedom with regard to the real shape of the church than we generally think. Many Christians today feel themselves powerless when they hear the word “church”. They consider church rather as something that they have to undergo than as something that they constitute actively. The church seems to be for them only an institution with strongly fixed structures, which are apparently unchangeable. One resigns oneself to the existing church as to something inevitable. That is a pity. For what the church really is—and the manner in which it behaves—depends to a large extent on the expectations and the will of the believers, even of the common believers.

Church is a pluriform event, within which it is possible to emphasize many aspects and make different choices. If this is so, the most important question will be: what kind of church do you choose or expect? And those expectations will undoubtedly exert an influence upon the praxis of Christian life and upon pastoral care, even on the small scale of a parish-community.

It would not be difficult to quote a considerable number of Augustinian texts in order to show a very traditionalist and harmless view of the church. But to do that, we must suppress a lot of texts which do not fit in easily with such a picture. In fact Augustine's conception of the church is extremely complex, but it is not incoherent. His way of considering the church is not a simple nor a static one. Church has for him more than just one meaning. In the church many meanings and levels have to be distinguished. All these meanings and levels are connected with one another, but they do not completely coincide. Augustine's picture of the church is full of paradoxes and tensions. It is a picture in which many dimensions coexist side by side, without being wholly identical. The most important, constantly recurring distinctions are the following:

- the church as an institution and the church as the Christ-event;
- the church as a sociological datum and the church as the Body of Christ;
- the church in time and space and the church as the Reign of God or the heavenly Reign;
- the church on earth and the City of God;
- the church of our days and the church as eschatological community;
- the pure and holy church and the imperfect and sinful church.

“To be in the church” is thus for Augustine an ambiguous expression, which can indicate both physical presence within the structures of the church, (“but walls do not make christians”)¹, and the inner partaking in the Body of Christ through love.

This complex picture excludes any straight-line thinking about the church. Therein lies perhaps the greatest merit of Augustine’s ecclesiology, because thus room is created for a dynamic vision. Even if Augustine himself did not draw all the conclusions implied in his ideas, he has nevertheless left us a very open and dynamic picture. He has shown that the church is a reality in process, a reality that has to pass through several phases in order to reach its specific goal. In fact, Augustine always speaks of the church as “the Reign of God in the situation of a church”². Therefore, it is impossible to say what to be the church means definitively. Nor can we say “where” exactly the church is present. For the church possesses a dimension by which it resists any calculation. For the same reason the church is withdrawn from human power; nobody can dispose of the church arbitrarily or set limits to it by his own will.

Regarding the starting-point of this article, I see a twofold possibility of choice with relation to the concrete stature of the church. The first choice to make is: do you cling to the church as an institution or do you want to live with a more spiritual conception of the church? The second choice to make is: do you wish to

1. According to Augustine, however, the walls belong to “the sacrament of the humility of the Logos”: *Confessiones* VIII, 2, 3-4. PL 32, 749-751. Cf. P. COURCELLE, “parietes faciunt christianos?": *Mélanges d'archéologie, d'épigraphie et d'histoire offerts à Jérôme Carcopino* (Paris 1966) 241-248.

2. This expression stems from a work which I have utilized several times for this survey of Augustine’s ecclesiology: P. BORGOMEIO, *L’Église de ce temps dans la prédication de saint Augustin* (Paris 1972) 14.

take the risk of an imperfect church or do you demand a perfect church?

The extent of church and
salvation:
Church from Abel

As modern historically minded people we now see the origin of the church in the events after the resurrection of Jesus³. Indeed from a historical point of view it would be nonsense to speak of christianity before Jesus time or to take into consideration the existence of a christian church before Christ. Generally, we consider the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost as the origin of the church. But this way of thinking was not that of Augustine. Certainly, Augustine will not deny that the historical Pentecost-event had its proper significance, but this significance was for him much more limited than for modern theologians. In Augustine's view Pentecost was not the absolute beginning of the working of the Spirit, and therefore neither was it the absolute beginning of the church. What was then for him particular significance of the sending of the Holy Spirit after Jesus' exaltation? Augustine saw the sending of the Spirit after Jesus exaltation principally as a greater manifestation and a more abundant communication of the Spirit, but by no means was Pentecost the first activity of the divine Spirit in the history of mankind. According to Augustine, there exists a difference between the self-manifestation of the Spirit before and after the life and work of Jesus Christ, so that we must assert that only at Pentecost did the church appear for the first time as a universal movement of "bringing together" (*congregatio*) all men in Jesus Christ. Summarizing Augustine's thoughts concerning the meaning of the Pentecost-event, we can say: only at that moment did the church as we know it now come into existence. But this does not

3. Only a few modern theologians will agree with W. MARXSEN "Die urchristlichen Kerygmata und das Ereignis Jesus von Nazareth": *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 73 [1976] 46), who qualifies as arbitrary the position that the resurrection is to be seen as the absolute terminus a quo for the christian proclamation as well as for the origin of the first communities around Jesus: "Angesichts der verschiedenen Inhalte des Kerygmas muss es doch als Willkür erscheinen, von einem einzigen aus (eben: der Gekreuzigte und Auferstandene) den terminus a quo für das Kerygma bestimmen zu wollen... Da es (wenn ich einmal so unterscheiden darf) für den Theologen Bultmann die Urgemeinde erst nach Ostern gibt, weil es das Kerygma erst nach Ostern gibt, der Exeget Bultmann aber den Character der Jesus-Tradition als Kerygma herausgearbeitet hatte, entstand der heute fast zum Dogma erhobene Kurzschluss: Das Synoptische Traditionsgut ist von Ostern her bestimmt".

mean that the church did not exist before Pentecost, though it had not exactly the same meaning and role as afterwards.

The background of this way of thinking is that the Holy Spirit (just as Jesus Christ) transcends the temporal limits of our history. The Spirit is actively present "in" our history, but He is not limited by it. Thus Augustine admits the historical reality of the two different phases of salvation-history, i. e. the Old and the New Testament, the periods before and after Pentecost, but he does not accept them as mere phases in time and space, by which the sovereign God can be restrained.⁴ The Old and the New Testaments are for Augustine more than chronical eras, for old and new are also inner attitudes of man's heart. That makes it possible to find the characteristics of the old in the new, and vice versa. If love is both the fulfilment of the Law and the goal of the sending of the Spirit after Easter, then a breakthrough of temporal boundaries becomes fully possible. Augustine declares that the righteous of the Old Testament are made righteous by the Spirit who filled their hearts with love, which is the fulfilment of the Law⁵. Wherever and whenever one meets justice, we may not forget that it is always brought forth by love⁶.

If we see Augustine admitting the possibility that people possess the Holy Spirit even before Jesus' birth, it will be obvious that he admits also the possibility of a self-communication of Christ even before His coming into this world. The endowment of Christ is parallel to the endowment of the Spirit. Everyone who lives according to the will of Jesus is a christian, because he lives in accordance with the essence of Jesus' message. The church is based of deeds, not on a name. Therefore, Augustine shifts not only the origin, but also the extent of the church. Extension of the origin means at the same time an extension of the dimensions of the church; both are connected with one another.

A number of texts present the church as beginning at Jerusalem⁷, while other texts see it beginning with the Cross or with the

4. Concerning the historical activity of the Holy Spirit up to and including Pentecost, cf. J. VERHEES, *God in beweging. Een onderzoek naar de pneumatologie van Augustinus*, (Wageningen 1968), 1-64.

5. *De spiritu et littera* 26,46: PL 44, 2281229.

6. *De natura et gratia* 63,74: PL 44,284. *Contra duas epistolas Pelagianorum* IV, 7,18: PL 44,622.

7. When Augustine declares that the church begins (coepit) from Jerusalem, it appears, however, from the context that he intends the church as we know it now, i. e. with its new Pentecostal mission of universal fertility.

Incarnation⁸. But ultimately Augustine sees the origin of the church within the Trinity itself. He does not hesitate to give a trinitarian origin and background to the church. The church is thus not only the Body of Christ, but also the temple of the Holy Spirit and even the temple of the whole Trinity. "The right order of the confession of faith requires that the church should be subordinated to the Trinity, just as a house is to its inhabitants, a temple to its God, and a community to its founder. The holy church as a whole i. e. the church in heaven as well as on earth, is the temple of God, even the temple of the whole most high Trinity"⁹.

The question of the origin of the church has repercussions on the question of its extent. It is not our intention to treat here the theme of the heavenly church including the angels¹⁰. The focus of our attention will be the church existing within the history of mankind. There we notice in the first place that Augustine extends the church to include Abraham. The church exists from the time of Abraham, the father of our faith: "Sisters and brothers, you must not think that the church is only present in those who became holy after the coming and birth of Jesus. No, all the saints of every period belong to the church. For one cannot say that our father Abraham does not belong to us, because he lived before the moment that Christ was born of the Virgin... The apostle Paul contradicts this, declaring that we are children of Abraham by following Abraham's faith (Rom. 4,16. Gal. 3,7). Therefore, following Abraham, we are received into the church. How could we then exclude Abraham from the church?... This church was also present in the holy prophets"¹¹.

8. Jesus' death lies in the line of his human birth: "The Word became flesh in order that we might live by his death" (*Contra Julianum* VI, 24,77: PL 44,869).

9. *Enchiridion* 15,56: PL 40, 258-259.

10. The idea of a "heavenly" church and the creation of an "ekklesia" of the elect before the origin of our world goes back very far in history. We find it in Hellenism, in the Old Testament, in the texts of Qumran, and also in some New Testament passages; K. BERGER, "Volksversammlung und Gemeinde Gottes. Zu den Anfängen der christlichen Verwendung von "ekklesia": *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 73 (1976) 167-207, especially 192-198; E. LAMIRANDE, *L'Eglise céleste selon saint Augustin*. Paris, 1963; G. LOCHER, "De "hemelse kerk" in haar aardse toestand volgens Augustinus": *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 21 (1966-1967) 277-301; LOCHER not unreasonably reproaches LAMIRANDE that he does not take into account sufficiently the double stature of the church in Augustine's thought. This double stature relates to the difference between the earthly and the heavenly church, although this duality is not contrary to the one essence of the church.

11. *Serm.* 4,11,11: PL 38,39.

Is the assertion that Abraham belongs to the christian church not symptomatic of an unhealthy christian triumphalism? This would certainly be so, if Augustine dared not also say the opposite, i. e. that we belong to Jacob, Isaac and Abraham¹². Still more important, however, is to inquire about the theological ground for Augustine's assertion of the church's existence from Abraham. Yet it seems that there is no other ground than faith. Very often Augustine describes Abraham's faith as belief in Christ who is to come. But it would be too simplistic to suppose here an explicit belief in Christ (how would such a faith be possible before the Incarnation?). In order to avoid misunderstandings, we must take into account what Augustine says in the text of *Sermo* 4 quoted above, namely that Abraham's faith relates "to something spiritual — what precisely? — I don't know"¹³. The concrete content of Abraham's faith, that made him a member of the church, would mainly have included faith in God and in His fidelity to the Covenant and to His promises.

With the Maccabean martyrs we have another set of texts, in which the foundations of the church appear more clearly. For what made them christians? Only their deeds, i. e. their struggle and suffering for God, who has revealed Himself both in the Law of Moses and in Jesus Christ. "Yet, Jews will reproach us: 'how can you consider our martyrs as belonging to you? Is it through stupidity or insolence that you are celebrating their memory? Read their confession of faith. Did they confess Christ?' But my answer to these Jews would be: Certainly, they did not confess Christ explicitly, for the mystery of Christ was still veiled"¹⁴. At the beginning of the same sermon Augustine had already warned against thinking that before the Christians became His people, Christ had no people at all. From this text we can conclude that the idea of a Christ-centred community (*populus*) depends clearly upon concrete faith lived in deeds.

Pursuing the same line of thought, Augustine becomes aware of the fact that there is no reason for stopping at Abraham and the Old Testament saints. One cannot maintain that there was no authentic faith and no authentic justice or holiness before Abraham. Therefore, Augustine feels himself obliged to extend the idea of the

12. *Enarratio in Ps.* 147,28: PL 37,1937. *In Iohannis evangelium tr.* 42,5: PL 35,1701.

13. *Serm.* 4,11,11: PL 38,39: "spirituale nescio quid".

14. *Serm.* 300,3,3: PL 38,1377.

church, asserting now that the church did not only exist from the time of Abraham, but even from Abel. Already from the very beginning of the human race there is a church. All the righteous of our history make up the church: "The church is old. From that moment that men are called to holiness, there is a church on earth. But there was a time that the church existed only in Abel"¹⁵. Why only in Abel? The obvious reason for this is the fact that at a certain moment in our history Abel was the only one to be righteous. The following text shows explicitly that justice is the norm for the existence of the church according to Augustine. "Are we alone the Body of Christ? And not those who have lived before us? No, all who have been righteous from the beginning of the world, have Christ as their Head"¹⁶. This criterion contains the key to the understanding of some difficult texts, such as "All the nations are christian and non-christian at the same time"¹⁷. The paradoxical expression "christian and non-christian at the same time" refers to the coexistence of justice and injustice in this world.

We may conclude that the church extends itself from the first to the last man and that this is founded on justice and love. But the foregoing considerations about the extent of the church are more than a theoretical game. The question of the extent of the church is intimately interwoven with the question of the extent of salvation. We know that Augustine adopted the view of Cyprian: "Outside the church there is no salvation". We must, however, be on our guard against a too simplistic interpretation of this principle. Does this principle have the meaning of a narrow-minded emphasis on the exclusivity of the *Catholica* as the institution of salvation? We do not think so, because "church", at least in the conception of

15. *Enarratio in Ps.* 128,2: PL 37,1689, in which Augustine extends this idea as follows: the church existed in Henoch alone, existed in Noah's house alone, in Abraham alone, in Lot alone, in the people of Israel alone, in Moses and in all the other saints alone. Cf. *Enarratio in Ps.* 90, Serm. 2,1: PL 37,1159. *Enarratio in Ps.* 61,4: PL 36,731-732. *De baptismo* I, 15,24: PL 43,122. More references in Y. CONGAR (*"Ecclesia ab Abel": Abhandlungen über Theologie und Kirche. Festschrift für Karl Adam*, Düsseldorf 1952, 79-108), who supports this idea with the following words: "La perception très vive qu'avaient les anciens de ce dernier point (=être en rapport de vitalisation et de salut avec le Christ) est une valeur d'un prix immense et qu'il ne faudrait pas facilement laisser oblitérer par la lumière plus claire d'une ecclésiologie de la médiation proprement ecclésiastique et hiérarchique de vérité et de grâce" (97-98).

16. *Enarratio in Ps.* 36, Sermo 3,4: PL 36,385. Cf. *De Civitate Dei* X, 25: PL 41,302. *Retractationes* I, 13,3: PL 32,603: "Nam res ipsa quae nunc christiana religio nuncupatur, erat apud antiquos, nec defuit ab initio generis humani".

17. *Serm.* 64, ed. C. LAMBOT: *Revue Bénédictine* 51 (1939) 11. MIGNE knows only a much reduced version of this sermon.

Augustine, generally means more than the empirical church. Our proof can be formulated in a question: if one holds fast to the meaning "empirical church", what does one then make of that great number of texts explicitly asserting the possibility of salvation outside the institutional church? There is a possibility of salvation for the faithful Jews of the Old Testament, and even for all the righteous from the beginning of our for Job¹⁸, for the sibyl¹⁹, the good thief²⁰, the unbaptized martyrs²¹, for Cornelius²², for catechumens dying before having received baptism²³, for Catholics who are un-

18. *Adnotationes in Job* 38: PL 34,872. *De Civitate Dei* XVIII, 47: PL 41, 609-610.

19. *De Civitate Dei* XVIII, 23: PL 41,580: "It seems that she (=the sibyl) is to be reckoned among the members of those who form part of the City of God".

20. *De diversis quaestionibus* 83, q. 62: PL 40, 53-54. *De baptismo* IV, 22,29; 25,32: PL 43, 173-176. *Contra Cresconium* II, 9,11: PL 43,473. *Quaestiones in Heptat.* III, 84: PL 34,713. *Serm.* 67,4,7. PL 38,436. According to these texts the faith of the good thief sufficed to obtain perfect salvation. But in later texts Augustine stiffens his attitude by pointing out the unlikely hypothesis that the good thief might have been baptized in one way or another: *Retractationes* I, 26; II, 18; II, 55,3: PL 32,627, 638,653. But I do not see here a radical negation by Augustine of the value of baptism of blood (=martyrdom), baptism of desire, or of the existence of predestined persons, who are saved without having been members of the visible church. Augustine's concern here is first of all not to supply an argument to the Pelagians in favour of their doctrine about the non-necessity of infant baptism.

21. On this point Augustine's view always remained constant. According to *De baptismo* IV, 22,29: PL 43,173 the effects of baptism can be taken over by martyrdom, by faith, and by conversion of heart. In *De anima et ejus origine* I, 9,10: PL 44,480, however, faith and conversion are no longer mentioned: "Nobody becomes a member of Christ, unless by baptism in Christ or by dying for Christ". Cf. *Ep* 265,4: PL 33,1087. *Enarratio in Ps.* 140,26: PL 37, 1832-1833. *Contra Gaudentium* I, 31,38: PL 43,729. *De Civitate Dei* XIII,7: PL 41,381.

22. The Spirit communicated Himself to Cornelius and to the courtier of queen Kandake in order to show that He communicates Himself independently of human ministry, "so that men would not have the illusion that the working of the Spirit is something which is in their power" (*Serm.* 99,11,11; 12,12: PL 38, 601-602). Nevertheless, Augustine usually demands the incorporation of Cornelius into the concrete church community in order to obtain complete salvation. The reason for this lies in the fact that a person who knows the church but who refuses to be incorporated into it, falls into "contemps of the cult of God (contemptus religionis)". Cf. *De baptismo* I, 8,10; IV, 21,28; 22,29; IV, 24,31: PL 43,115. 172-175. More references (though not a complete list) in S. GRABOWSKI, *The church. An introduction to the theology of St. Augustine*, (St. Louis-London 1957) 251-267. But GRABOWSKI interprets the texts too one-sidedly in the sense of baptism as the exclusive means to salvation.

23. *De baptismo* IV, 21,28; 22,29. PL 43, 172-174. Many authors assert that Augustine in his later texts holds a more severe opinion. They refer to *Serm.* 27, 6,6: PL 38,181, where he in fact speaks of the absence of baptismal grace, but where he does not explicitly speak of an exclusion from eternal salvation. Other texts which are often quoted in relation to this theme do not deal with catechumens in danger of death without having the possibility of receiving baptism. It is obvious that for catechumens, who are not seriously ill but in good health, the-

justly excommunicated²⁴. It is possible for them all to share in the divine salvation outside the church as we know it. Are all these cases simply exceptions to a general rule? This seems very unlikely! Have we to admit then that E. Lamirande is right when he says that "Augustine always envisages here the future integration of those people into the visible unity of the church"?²⁵ It is difficult to see how such a general statement could be completely exact. I would like to make a distinction between two sets of texts. Lamirande is right with regard to the cases of Cornelius and the catechumens. In fact, in his later texts Augustine demands for them (not in the texts of his first period) future incorporation into the church. But Lamirande omits to distinguish between salvation-texts for men who lived before the Incarnation and those who lived after the coming of Jesus²⁶. For the former category, Augustine is more flexible than for the latter. At first glance this may seem surprising. But looking more attentively, this is only due to the fact that since Pentecost the church is a concrete and universal community,

re can be no salvation without the firm willingness to receive the sacrament of incorporation into the Body of Christ.

24. *De vera Religione* 6,11; PL 34,128; *De baptismo* I, 17,26: PL 43, 123-124; *Contra Cresconium* II, 21,26: PL 43,482; *Ep* 250: PL 33, 1066-1067.

25. E. LAMIRANDE, *La situation ecclésiologique des Donatistes d'après saint Augustin. Contribution à l'histoire doctrinale de l'oecuménisme* (Ottawa 1972), 144-145. Another opinion is defended by M. WEIJLAND, *Augustinus en de kerkelijke tucht. Een onderzoek naar de grenzen van de kerk bij Augustinus tegen de achtergrond van het donatistisch schisma* (Kampen 1965), 193-194: "The criterion of the Catholics' necessity for salvation did not consist for Augustine, even during the anti-Donatist struggle, in the ecclesiastical institution as such, and consequently nor did it consist in being present within the boundaries of a certain sacramental organization, apart from a few cases. Only 'to be rooted in the very powerful strength of love' and 'to be in spiritual communion with God and the neighbour, were necessary for salvation according to Augustine. This has to be expressed, it is true, in a visible unity and in a community of believers gathered around the Word and Sacrament... Then, there are no 'Ausnahmefälle'".

26. On this point I agree partly with F. HOFMANN, *Der Kirchenbegriff des hl. Augustinus in seinen Grundlagen und in seiner Entwicklung*, (München 1933), 214 and 227. From the texts it becomes clear that there is a difference of attitude in Augustine with respect to the Old Testament situation and the New Testament situation. But the basis of this difference is not to be found in Old Testament "universalism" over against New Testament "exclusivism". In that case, there would be radical break between the Old and New Testaments in Augustine's thought, which is very unlikely. The reason for this different attitude is to be sought rather in the conscious acceptance or refusal of the Spirit of Christ. The circumstances for such decision differed in both periods. But then at the same time the constant element in Augustine's thinking appears: the Spirit of Christ, who is always at the centre of his ecclesiology. Therefore, on the question of salvation outside the existing church, I differ from the opinion of F. HOFMANN on several points.

willed by Jesus himself, which one has to accept with humility as the proper milieu of living faith, albeit that this milieu is weak and contaminated. It must be admitted that Augustine here too quickly presupposes that since Pentecost everyone is able to know and to recognize the true church. For this reason he so seldom pays attention to the possibility of good faith in people outside of the Catholica. But all considered, I think that the exception-texts are so numerous that we cannot speak of erratic blocks within Augustine's theology. The exception-texts are a part of it. The key to the interpretation of these texts goes with the question "where is Christ?" or better "where is the Christ-event?". According to Augustine one cannot just grasp this event without further ado.

The church as Christ-event:
illegitimate unhistorical view?

Some representations of the church clearly fall short as interpretations of Augustine's ideas. This is the case if one presents the church as a kind of foundation or society that is erected by Jesus Christ. Such a foundation is granted a more or less independent existence apart from its founder. But the relationship between Jesus and the church is not to be seen in such a loose way. Whether a church exists or not is decided by Christ living in the faithful, because the church is primarily communion, i. e. a lived relationship with Jesus Christ. In other words, Jesus has not founded a religion independently of his own person. According to Jesus' own message, "to serve God" consists in a relationship between men and God, just as He himself has lived this relationship with God.

Further, one ought not to consider the church as the coming together of a group of religiously like-minded people. The church is more than a number of people discovering that they share the same faith and finding this a sufficient motive for uniting themselves into a community, with the hope of supporting one another and in order to celebrate the same mysteries of faith. In this case again, one passes over the most essential aspect of the church, i. e. the union with Christ himself. Thus the church becomes a society created by men, a society that one can remain in or leave at one's own discretion or that can be judged according to norms of utility or fruitfulness: is this church useful or not, does it bear fruit or not? Both conceptions — that of Christ as the founder of a society as well as that of believers uniting themselves into a society — make

the church an object or an external datum apart from the Christ-event.

Augustine's view of the church was much more christological. He has given a twofold christological interpretation to the church-event. First, by basing the whole salvific activity of the church on the activity of Christ. Christ himself is acting in the sacraments of the church, and all the sacraments are His property: "The church may not consider itself superior to Christ, thinking that it can itself baptize... Christ baptizes in an invisible way, for the visible baptism as well as the invisible grace are Christ's, but He is baptizing by the ministry of the church"²⁷. With regard to the interpretation of Mt. 16,18: "And on this rock I will build my church", Augustine clearly prefers the interpretation that Christ himself (or faith in Christ which is the same) is the rock, although he does not exclude the other interpretation that Peter is the rock²⁸.

From that it follows that, for Augustine, the church was primarily the active gathering of a new mankind into communion with Christ²⁹. The church becomes present in this world with the presence of Christ. From the moment that people follow Jesus in faith and love, from the moment that people accept Him, communion with Christ comes into existence. The church is the history between God and man, the history of a relationship, or in other words: the church is the Christ-event.

Consequently, to build up the community of the church means a dynamic movement, and is not a static datum. The heart of this movement is our union with Christ, which results in our union with one another (but it would lead us too far afield to develop this aspect now). Partaking in the life of Jesus is not an external or tangible fact. It happens always through living relationships, and especially in acts of faith, hope and love, which are our pre-eminent "relational" acts: faith, hope and love are never oriented towards ourselves, but towards others. They are at the basis of communion of life in the strict sense, i. e. to share with one's own life in the life of another person. Communion of life between us and Jesus may seem vague and abstract, but it becomes very concrete if one puts it in other terms. To share in Jesus' life means e. g. to pray to the Father as Jesus did, to wish to be at the service of others like Jesus,

27. *Contra Cresconium* II, 21,26: PL 43,482.

28. *In Johannis evangelium* tr. 124,5: PL 35, 1973-1974; *Retractationes* I, 21, 1: PL 32,618.

29. E. FRANZ, *Totus Christus. Studien über Christus und die Kirche bei Augustin* (Bonn 1956) 60-61.

to go out of oneself to the outcasts from society and religion with the same faith as Jesus, to love friend and enemy with the same love that Jesus loved them, to be willing to suffer for others just as Jesus did. Augustine says this very briefly: "Those who are made perfect by the gospel and by God's grace, live here in this world only for others"³⁰.

When speaking of the church, to which aspect does Augustine first of all give his attention? Is it not the aspect of being a christian in deed? Thus, we find a remarkable parallelism between the life of the earthly Jesus and the real membership of the church. This parallelism lies in the service of God. "To serve the one God is the *raison d'être* of the whole church"³¹. But was not the service of God and the Reign of God also the main concern of the earthly Jesus? Did He not come in order to bring the true worship of the Father? And was this not the very purport of his life? That is the parallelism between the life of Jesus and the life of the church. And from this Augustine comes to the conclusion that wherever love, justice, peace, or, in a word, a right attitude towards God come about, Christ "happens" and the church will be present.

This brings us to the question whether this does not entail an illegitimate and idealistic neglect of the historical existence of Jesus as well as of the historical origin of the church? First, we have to admit that Augustine's views are based on the christological schema of his time (chalcedonian in essence, although from the pre-chalcedonian period), in which the universal significance of the earthly Jesus as a matter of fact was linked to Christ as the second person within the blessed Trinity. That made it much easier for him than it is for us to interpret the whole of salvation as a salvation brought forth by Jesus Christ. Certainly, the historical life of Jesus was also taken into account in the patristic period (and perhaps more than we think generally), but historical facts were surpassed and overshadowed, as it were, by the Son of God as a divine Person. This had far reaching consequences. It meant that something may exceed the historical limits of Jesus as man, but that nothing can escape from the influence of Jesus as divine Person.

We find with Augustine a transcending of the historical dimensions of the life of Jesus, and I admit that this is not without great

30. *Enarratio 2 in ps. 30, sermo 2,5*: PL 36,241.

31. *Enchiridion 15,56*: PL 40,259. The same is said of Christianity: "This is the Christian religion: to serve and to worship the one God" (*In Iohannis evangelium tr. 23,5*: PL 35,1585).

risks. In fact, such a transcending may easily lead to an underestimation of the concrete history of Jesus, which is the indispensable basis of christian faith. For this reason expressions such as "Christ-event" and "anonymous christianity" are severely criticized nowadays. R. Schnackenburg rejects the expression "Christ-event" because in that term the tension between history and proclamation is no longer present³². And H. Küng declares that the expression "anonymous christianity" is a contradiction as great as "a wooden iron"³³.

But I wonder if these assertions can be the last word in such a complex matter? Apart from the question of the suitability or unsuitability of these expressions (perhaps other expressions are more appropriate!), I think that the foregoing considerations from part of a broader problem and that this problem cannot be simply ignored. The question is: how can a particular historical fact have universal significance?³⁴ Philosophically speaking, it is not to be excluded that a historical event may have some influence upon the course of history previous to its actually coming about. Future events project their shadow, and here precisely lies the ground of all hope. But there is something that seems to be more important, namely the universality of salvation and the recognition that God's salvation is not limited to the person of the earthly Jesus or to the institutional church. We believe firmly that the universal significance of Jesus consisted in the fact that God worked in Him. But we believe at the same time that God's salvific activity can comprise the whole of mankind, or in other words that God remains free. Therefore, not all salvation is brought about by the man Jesus. We must admit, however, that a fundamental correspondance exists between the salvation worked by Jesus and the salvation worked by God apart from Jesus as man. And here, in my opinion, lies the deeper meaning of Augustine's affirmations. The expressions "Christevent" and "anonymous christianity", are unsuitable if they

32. R. SCHNACKENBURG, "Der geschichtliche Jesus in seiner ständigen Bedeutung für Theologie und Kirche": *Rückfrage nach Jesus* (Quaestiones disputatae 63), (Freiburg 1974) 211.

33. H. KÜNG, *Christ sein* (München 1974) 118.

34. In relation to this question see: E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *Jezus het verhaal van een levende*, (Bloemendaal 1974), 488-513 (German translation: *Jesus-Die Geschichte von einem Lebenden*, Freiburg i. Br. 1975): "The particular historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth has undoubtedly determined in a special way the universal religious theme of God's saving presence. But the proper character of the activity of Jesus of Nazareth is not without connections with general religiosity. Only in this way, does one avoid a one-sided exclusivism of Christianity with regard to other religions" (500).

become expressions of something other than the universality of divine salvation, e. g. when they are used in a triumphalistic sense. But are they also unsuitable if they represent a call for humility with regard to the free gift of God's grace?

As we pursue the line of Augustine's thought, it will be obvious that he has no difficulty at all in presenting the church as the prolongation and representation of Christ, or as Christ who lives on. Here again we meet objections from modern theologians. E Käsemann's criticism can be summarized as follows:

- 1) the historical body of Jesus remains earthly and corruptible, and has no continued spiritualized existence within the church
- 2) The Spirit of Christ constitutes the church (only after Easter) this constitutive function of the Spirit would be deprived of its power if we said that the Spirit only maintains, takes care of and nourishes the church.
- 3) The church is not necessarily involved in the salvation-event; it does not minister salvation as bride of Christ, or as mother of the faithful.

What Käsemann fears in those representations of the church is clear: he is afraid that Christ and the Spirit will be deprived of their precedence and that priority will be given to the church as Body of Christ. The church would become a kind of store of Christ's salvation. In that case, one would think of the church as an independent and autonomous entity, apart from Christ. Then it would be no longer Christ who draws the church into unity with Himself, but the autonomous church which draws Christ to itself. And this is inadmissible³⁵. H. Mühlen, in his turn, considers the idea of church as Christ who lives on as neo-romantic. The incarnation is a historical fact that cannot be repeated within history, and consequently cannot be reiterated in the church³⁶.

But these remarks do not really concern Augustine's view, for he would agree with them without difficulty. The intention of his strict christological interpretation of the church is precisely to prevent the church becoming separated from Christ and the Spirit as

35. See "Das theologische Problem des Motivs vom Leibe Christi" in: E. KASEMANN, *Paulinische Perspektiven*, (Tübingen 1969) 178-210, especially 195.

36. H. MÜHLEN, *Una Mystica Persona. Die Kirche als das Mysterium der heilsgeschichtlichen Identität des H. Geistes in Christus und den Christen*³, (Paderborn 1968) 174-178.

an autonomous thing. According to Augustine, the church is nothing in itself, and apart from Christ it loses its significance. Therefore, the church never acts on its own authority; on the contrary, Christ and the Spirit are acting through the church. Why should the church then not be able to represent Christ? To represent somebody or to be the representative of somebody means that another person is present in me. Thus representation is far removed from existing independently and from self-righteousness. On the contrary, it is the most pure expression of what grace means, namely the life, the energy and the word of Christ and the Spirit becoming present in us. Only by participation in the saving activity of Christ and the Spirit, does redemption come about within the church. To be sure, the church cannot be a repetition of the unique historical fact of the incarnation. Augustine's thinking was never so materialistic that he believed in such a possibility. His view of the church was rather that of an interpersonal relationship with Jesus Christ. But this personal relationship comes into existence again and again in successive generations of believers. The life of the earthly Jesus proves to be infinitely fruitful.

A pure church or a church
of good and evil?

In another way too Augustine had to choose between different possible views of the church. For in his days two conceptions of the church, both having a long history behind them, were in keen competition with one another: on the one hand, the Montanist-Donatist conception, and, on the other hand, the conception of a universal church. What was at stake in those conceptions was nothing less than a choice between a church of the pure and a church in which there is also room for evil. This tension between purity and impurity can be described in different ways: as a tension between a pneumatic and a christological church, a charismatic and a hierarchical church, a church of volunteers and a church of ordinary people, a church for the elite and a church for the masses, a church of the pure and a church of sinners. All these tensions can be reduced to one and the same fundamental question, namely, is it possible to impose limits on the church-event or not? After a long period of reflection Augustine opposed himself consciously to any human limitation of the church. He chose a "mixed" church-community with good and bad. This had far reaching consequences.

The community of the church is to be seen in a realistic way.

Excessive expectations cause only disappointment. Augustine states this explicitly: "If I may generalize: everybody is praising the church. "Christians are great men, the Catholic church is great. Within that church they all love one another, and they are all helpful to one another in everything..." Attracted by this praise, somebody enters the community of the church, and then he discovers that even there bad are living among good. Before he entered the church, nothing was said to him about this situation. The false christians fill him with repugnance and unfortunately he draws away from the good ones"³⁷. Augustine insists always on the fact that the greatest threat for the church does not come from outside (not from paganism, Judaism, Donatism, schism or heresy), but from within. Paganism as an objective entity is not so important; it is more important that paganism should not be present in the hearts of christians, that they should not set up there idols of their own making. "If we feel sorrowful, then it is not because of the pagans, but because of christians, our own brethren, who wish to belong to the church merely bodily, while their hearts are elsewhere"³⁸. Speaking of the Jews, Augustine declares that they do not cause much trouble (tribulatio) for the christians. The same thing, alas, cannot be said of bad christians "who rise with the intention of dealing a blow to the Body of Christ"³⁹. All depends on the attitude of one's heart. Therefore, christians have first of all to be attentive to their own heart. "Was Jesus afraid that some seed should fall on the road, other seed on rocky ground or among thorns? If He had feared the difficult ground, He would never have reached the good ground. Is it for us to discuss the Jews and to speak of them as chaff? No, let us pay attention to ourselves and let us be careful that we ourselves are not the hardened road, nor rocky ground and nor thorns, but good ground"⁴⁰.

Christians themselves are the word enemies of the church. Those who "live within the church perversely" are on the same level as schismatics and heretics⁴¹. Good and evil, God and selfmade idols exist also within the church. Augustine uses here risky similes which

37. *Enarratio in Ps.* 99,12: PL 37,1278.

38. *Serm.* 62,11,17. PL 38,423. In *De Civitate Dei* XX, 9,3: PL 41,674 the public enemies of the church are put on a par with the hidden enemies within the church. In *Serm.* 354,2,2: PL 39, 1563-1564 the enemies from within are called worse than those from outside. Cf. *In Johannis evangelium tr.* 45,12: PL 35,1725: "Many sheep are outside the church, and many wolves inside".

39. *Enarratio in Ps.* 85,9: PL 37,1095.

40. *Serm.* 101,3, ed. C. LAMBOT, *Augustini sermones selecti*, (Utrecht 1950), 47: PL 38,607, offers here a corrupted text.

perhaps nowadays we no longer dare to apply to the church. The church is for him the crippled Jacob: "The church is still cripple — one leg is strong, but the other one is weak"⁴². While we would like to describe the church as the ninety-nine faithful sheep in search of the one lost sheep, Augustine considers the church itself as the lost sheep: "The church is the town on the mountain, but it is also that one lost sheep which the shepherd was looking for, in order to bring it joyfully back on his shoulders, after having found it"⁴³. The church is moreover compared with the prostitute of I Kings 3, 16-28. Two prostitutes are living in the same house. They represent two kinds of people present in the church: people full of love and other people full of hypocrisy. How could the dishonest prostitute put her dead baby into the arms of the other prostitute, who represents the church? The reason for this is that the church sometimes falls asleep, i. e. because injustice and the night of evil sometimes prevail within the church, and suffocate love⁴⁴.

The temptation to leave such a church can be great. "Some people say 'We want to be left in peace; we don't want to have to put up with others; let us withdraw from the crowd. When we have found some security, we will be at ease'. If you are looking for rest, you are looking as it were for a bed, in which you can have a rest without any trouble. But from that bed also one will be taken and the other will be left. (Lc. 17,34). Sisters and brothers, let nobody deceive you. If you do not wish to be deceived and if you want to continue loving one another, be aware that each way of life in the church has hypocrites in its ranks. I do not say that everyone is a hypocrite, but I say that each way of life numbers hypocrites in its ranks. There are bad christians, but there are also good christians. An first glance you see a great number of bad christians, who as a thick layer of chaff prevent you from reaching the good grains of corn. Believe me, under the chaff there are also good grains of corn"⁴⁵.

The presence of good and evil in the church is a necessity for Augustine, because the mixture of good and evil is inevitable and

41. *Enarratio in Ps.* 85,19: PL 37,1095.

42. *Serm.* 5,8: PL 38,59.

43. *Serm.* 37,2,2: PL 38,222.

44. *Serm.* 10, 5-7: PL 38, 94-96. In *Sermo ad Coesariensis ecclesiae plebem* 8: PL 43,696. Augustine rejects the name "prostitute" for the *Catholica*. But prostitute is used here clearly with the biblical meaning of "religious unfaithfulness".

45. *Enarratio in Ps.* 99,13: PL 37, 1279-1280.

fundamental in human existence itself. The church reflects this human situation. Augustine is sure of his ground, for he relies entirely on the evangelical parables about the Reign of God: the parable of the fishing-net (Mt. 13, 47-49. Lc. 5, 1-11), the weeds in the field (Mt. 13, 24-30), the threshing-floor (Mt. 3,12. Lc. 3,17). "The following similes come to my mind: that of a wine-press in which the dregs as well as good wine can be found, or of a treshing-floor upon which both chaff and wheat is lying, or of a fishing-net in which there are good fish as well as bad, or of Noah's ark in which both pure and impure animals are to be found... We see that all kinds of sinners are now mixed with good and holy people within the church"⁴⁶.

These texts contrast sharply with other texts in which Augustine praises the church as the resourceful woman (*mulier fortis*), the true mother, the bride of Christ and the inviolate virgin. But that does not mean that we have here two different ecclesiologies, depending upon whether he is speaking about a sinful or a holy church. Indeed, modern interpretators are puzzled by the two categories of texts. Some of them declare that the texts about the holy church belong exclusively to an eschatological perspective; only the heavenly church is holy. Others think that Augustine is willing to admit that christians are sinful, but not the church itself; the church itself is always free from sin.

In my opinion, however, these solutions pass over Augustine's dynamic view of the church. It is impossible to detach the church from the christians. The church is to be considered — just as every other community — as first of all a personal communion. The answer to the question "Who or what is the church?" is steadfastly "We are the church!"⁴⁷. The mixture of good and bad forms part of the essence of the church in its earthly phase. On these grounds Augustine even dares "justify" the presence of sinners within the church. In the controversy with the Pelagians sinfulness becomes a characteristic of the "true church". The mixture of good and evil reflects perfectly the situation of the church in space and time, as well as its orientation towards the eschatological future. Sin has still to be overcome and perfect unity has still to be brought about. Just as the body of the earthly Jesus formed the scene of a struggle between life and death, the Body of Christ i. e. the church, will be the domain where life and death fight for supremacy.

46. *Enarratio in Ps.* 8,13: PL 36, 114-116.

47. *Enarratio in Ps.* 122,5: PL 37,1633. *Serm.* 213,7,7. PL 38,1063. *Serm.* 359, 9: PL 39,1597.

For a good understanding of Augustine's thought, it seems to me that we must make a distinction (but without separation) between an authentic church community and a mixed church community. Such a distinction does not coincide with a radical opposition between the earthly and the heavenly church, nor between the visible and the invisible church (for, according to Augustine, the demarcation between good and evil is by the nature of things invisible). It is always a question of one and the same church, but in different phases of its existence. A dualistic conception of the church does not fit in with Augustine's view. Such a dualism would make the idea of the growth of the "totus Christus", to which Augustine attaches such great importance, superfluous⁴⁸. But what does it mean to be an authentic church? From the texts it appears that this authenticity coincides with "being in Christ" or with "being the Body of Christ". Therefore, the church in which we now live, is not a completed or fixed entity. This church is a church in becoming and in process. It is in the stage of growing into the perfect "corpus Christi". Every phase of its history forms a part of the history of the whole church in all its different facets.

For this reason we come to the conclusion that the real Body of Christ is mixed with the church as church of the masses, or as institution. But this does not mean that the Body of Christ in itself is mixed. The Body of Christ is connected with sinners and its mode of existence is that of a "mixture", but the Body of Christ itself is not divided into two parts by mixture of good and evil. On this point Augustine disagrees radically with the opinion of Tyconius: "The second thesis of Tyconius is that of the Body of Christ divided into two parts. But he is wrong in speaking so. For that Body of Christ which will not be with Him eternally, is in reality not the true Body of Christ. It would be better to speak of "the genuine and the mixed Body of the Lord... Therefore, this thesis should be more suitably called about the mixed church"⁴⁹. The Body of Christ is, as it were, the pure nucleus after which the church is striving.

The foregoing takes away every illusion concerning the church in time and space. We can no longer cherish the hope that the mix-

48. Concerning the idea of "Christus Totus" see: T. VAN BAVEL, *Christ in dieser Welt. Augustinus zu Fragen seiner und unserer Zeit*, (Würzburg 1974), 94-112. T. VAN BAVEL, B. BRUNING, "Die Einheit des "Totus Christus" bei Augustinus": *Scientia Augustiniana, Festschrift A. Zumkeller zum 60. Geburtstag* (Würzburg 1975) 43-75.

49. *De doctrina christiana* III, 32,44: PL 34,82.

ture of good and evil in the church is no more than an external thing, in such a way that it would be easy to separate good from evil, or to distinguish them clearly. This is not true. Nevertheless, the mixture of good and evil occurs in different degrees. The two extremes go from an external to an inner level. Within the church community we find an external physical coexistence of good and bad people. That coexistence must be accepted, lest the unity of the church be destroyed. With regard to the inner mixture, the minimum requirement is that the good separate themselves from the bad in a spiritual way, i. e. with their hearts and desires, but not in a spatial or physical way (otherwise the unity would be dissolved). This latter demand makes things difficult and complicated, for it is impossible to define exactly and absolutely good and evil. Just as nobody knows how far he is good himself, so nobody is able to judge another person. Nobody is transparent to another and nobody is able to see the heart of another person. This is very often stated by Augustine: "What is more human than the impossibility of looking into the heart of a human being, and the impossibility of fathoming its secrets? Usually we suppose something else to be in that heart than what there really is... Therefore, we must abstain from any definitive and positive judgments and most of all we are not allowed to condemn anything prematurely, until the Lord comes who will enlighten the abysses of our darkness and reveal the motives of every heart... But precisely because of this darkness of the human heart, something happens which is surprising and deplorable at the same time, namely that we turn away from somebody, shun him, wish not to associate with him, and do not want to be in communication with him, because we think that he is a worthless man, while he is in reality a good man"⁵⁰.

It would be a mistake to suppose that the mixture of good and evil is only present in others. It is also present in ourselves. Each of us is light and darkness at the same time. It would be nonsense always to put the blame on others. Augustine points out: "Sisters and brothers, one thing is certain: either you will destroy injustice, or you will be destroyed by injustice. But do not try to destroy injustice as something alien to yourself. Look at yourselves and see what is fighting against you in yourself. And be watchful that you are not conquered by your own injustice"⁵¹. Both good and bad people are invited to the wedding-feast of the Reign of God. According to Augustine this "mixed" invitation is self-evident, for "first of all we

50. *In Iohannis evangelium* tr. 90, 2-3: PL 35,1859.

ought to know that we are all bad in some way. I tell you, even good people are in some way or other bad, just as bad people are under some aspects good"⁵².

It follows that the authentic church cannot be defined easily. No more than one can treat the church of our days as completely identical with the Body of Christ, can one treat it as identical with the City of God. But the opposite is also true: the City of the devil is not to be identified, with society, the State or the Roman Empire. Good and evil border on each other and they cut across all human situations and all straightline thinking would be entirely wrong, according to Augustine's statement: "These two kinds of people are mixed... Therefore, do not despair with regard to the citizens of the Reign of Heaven, when you see them busy taking care of the affairs of Babylon or of temporal affairs in an earthly society. On the other hand, do not immediately congratulate people occupied with heavenly things, for sometimes sons of perdition sit in the chair of Moses... Those who care for earthly things should lift up their hearts towards heaven, and those who are occupied with the words of heaven, must keep their hearts upon this earth"⁵³.

Church as invitation

Taking all the foregoing considerations into account, one may ask oneself whether in Augustine's view there is still a place for the church as an institution. Yes, there is, although we do not find in his works many explicit texts about the church as a concrete institution with sociological and hierarchical structures. The reason for this is twofold. In the first place, an institutional centralized authority was not very far developed in the ancient church. Certainly, some regular relationship between the churches of North Africa and Rome already existed, but it is not at all easy to define them nor to grasp their import. During the Donatist controversy, Augustine emphasizes the importance of communion with Rome, and the primacy of the Apostolic See (cathedra) there. But not one text allows us to conclude that this was a primacy in the modern sense of the word. The church of Rome seems nevertheless to be more

51. *Enarratio in Ps.* 63,9: PL 36,764.

52. *Serm.* 90,2: PL 38,559.

53. *Enarratio in Ps.* 51,6: PL 36, 603-604.

than a simple sister-church, equal to and no way superior to the church of Carthage. We must take into account that during the Donatist period relations with Rome did not come to the fore, because Donatism was almost exclusively the affair of the North African church. This situation changed in the struggle against Pelagianism, which threatened the church as whole. During this controversy, the bishops of North Africa appealed more frequently to Rome, and Augustine recognized as a matter of course the high dignity and the great authority of Rome. But he never speaks of an absolute doctrinal or juridical primacy of Rome, though Rome's primacy undoubtedly includes more than a primacy of honour. In spite of a notable evolution in the idea of primacy, one gets the impression that in the time of Augustine Rome's primacy was still nearer to the second century formulation "Rome has a primacy in love and faith"⁵⁴ than to the modern conception of primacy.

With regard to disciplinary questions, it is to be remarked that the autonomy of the local churches was still very great. The North Africans were especially fond of their autonomy. Among the bishops of North Africa Augustine seems to have been an exception, in so far as he was the one who most favoured the concentration of ecclesiastical authority in Rome⁵⁵. As an example of the love for independence of the North African bishops vis-à-vis Rome in disciplinary questions, we quote the following text concerning the affair of the priest, Apiarius, deposed by the North Africans but rehabilitated by Rome: "Even if the canons to which the Apostolic See refers are genuine [Rome was indeed mistaken!] and are applied by you in Italy, even then we do not want to be forced to tolerate such things [=the arrogant and authoritarian actions of the Roman legate Faustinus] and we are not prepared to endure unbearable things. Therefore, as long as your Holiness presides over the church of Rome, we do not expect to experience such pride (istum tyfum) again"⁵⁶.

On the level of ecclesiastical organization the ancient church had some characteristics which are worth taking into consideration even in our days, e. g. a. greater autonomy of the local churches, a

54. IGNAIUS OF ANTIOCH, *The Epistle to the Romans* (in the address). We follow here the interpretation of O. PERLER, "Ignatius von Antiochien und die römische Christengemeinde": *Divus Thomas* 22 (1944) 413-451.

55. W. MARSCHALL, *Karthago und Rom. Die Stellung der Nordafrikanischen Kirche zum apostolischen Stuhl in Rom*. Stuttgart, 1971.

56. Letter of the Council of Carthage (419) to the bishop of Rome, Bonifatius, ed. C. MUNIER, *Concilia Africae* (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 149), (Turnhout 1974) 159-160.

much larger number of bishops (as a counter-balance against a top-heavy hierarchy), a greater participation of lay people in sacramental ministry, a more profound consciousness of the community aspect of vocation (has vocation not been interpreted too individualistically in the last centuries?) and of responsibility for the church.

Besides institutionalization in the sense of an increasing authority of the church, we find institutionalization in the sense of a fixed practice of ecclesiastical life. Augustine is always concerned to show the relativity of such a fixed praxis. He subordinates external ecclesiastical life entirely to the relationship of faith in Jesus Christ. The former is meaningful only in the light of the latter. "Weighing things in his heart, somebody comes to the decision: I will get up early every morning, I will go to church, I will pray a morning-hymn and an evening-hymn, a third or fourth hymn at home, I will offer every day a sacrifice of praise as well as a sacrifice of immolation to my God. If you do this, you are doing something good. But be on your guard and do not imagine that you are yet safe, because you are doing this. Perhaps you are praising God with your tongue, but cursing Him with your life"⁵⁷. What is the wedding-dress of a christian? To this question Augustine answers that neither the sacraments, nor baptism, nor the eucharist, nor fasting, nor church-attendance, nor healing miracles, nor the gifts of prophecy or of tongues are the wedding-dress of a christian. Only love which springs from a clean heart, from a good conscience, and from faith that is genuine (1 Tim. 1,5), is the wedding-dress of a christian. This does not mean that prayer, sacrament and gifts of the Spirit are valueless. On the contrary. But Augustine intends to say that all those things are not decisive for having Christ in our heart (*Christum habere*). Ultimately, we have Christ only by love⁵⁸.

These conditions for a genuine membership of the church are made to Catholic christians. Augustine's argument always comes down to the following three elements: love - Spirit - church. Absence of love means absence of the Spirit, and absence of the Spirit means absence of the genuine church. Precisely the same conditions are made for the Donatists: neither baptism, nor faith in Christ, nor the sacraments, nor prophecy, nor knowledge are decisive for genuine membership of the church, but only love⁵⁹.

57. *Enarratio in Ps.* 49,23: PL 36,580.

58. *Serm.* 90, 5-6: PL 38, 561-562.

59. *Serm. ad Caesariensis ecclesiae plebem* 3: PL 43, 692-693. When Augus-

The texts quoted above are not inspired by contempt for the institutional aspects of the church. The relativity of the institutional facets has just the opposite effect with Augustine to what we would expect, namely the surprising effect of increasing his love for the imperfect institution. For him it is to be excluded that a Christian despises the external life of the church. For in his view it is obvious that the Christ-event happens in imperfect and relative ecclesiastical forms. Albeit that the authentic church is not simply identical with the empirical church, the latter coincides nevertheless with the former. Here we find identity and non-identity at the one is not allowed to leave the visible unity. "How can somebody same time. If one wishes to form part of the genuine Body of Christ, who leaves the church, still be in Christ, for he is detaching himself from the Body of Christ"⁶⁰.

In this paradoxical situation of identity and non-identity lies the strength of Augustine's conception of the church. Non-identity creates room for ecclesiastical self-criticism and for permanent confrontation with the Gospel. Such a confrontation with the genuine Christ-event prevents the church from being occupied only with itself and with maintaining its own position. The church may not rest content with merely justifying the established order. It is not the church that takes up Christ, but Christ who takes up the church. On the other hand, the principle of identity safeguards Augustine from leaving too big a gap open up between the church as Christ-event and as institution. The link between both is not just a question of free choice we cannot just take or leave the institution as we see fit. Writing off the institution always concerns the Christ-

tine in *De baptismo* III, 19,26: PL 43,152 considers the Donatists as strangers (*alieni*) and pseudo-Christians, and reckons them among the antichrist, we ought not to forget that he uses exactly the same terms with regard to bad Christians within the Catholic church: cf. *In epistolam Iohannis* tr. 3, 3-5: PL 35, 1998-2000. *De baptismo* I, 10,14: PL 43,117. Augustine formulates absolute demands concerning the boundaries of the church always from the love-criterion. And he does this vis-à-vis those who live lovelessly within the *Catholica* as well as vis-à-vis the Donatists contravening love outside the *Catholica*. E. LAMIRANDE, *La situation ecclésiologique des Donatistes d'après saint Augustin* (Ottawa 1972) does not emphasize this parallelism enough; consequently Augustine's attitude to the Donatists makes too harsh and merciless an impression, and the institutional church is presented in too black and white a fashion.

60. *In epistolam Iohannis* tr. I, 12; PL 36,1986. Cf. *Enarratio in Ps.* 54, 8-9: PL 36, 633-635: here Augustine draws a parallel between living with good and evil within the church and living with good and evil on a profane level. Also on the level of normal social life it is impossible to withdraw from human society with its good and evil, even if one would like it.

event itself. The growth of the church is the growth of Christ, and whoever rejects the church, rejects Christ⁶¹.

The theme of the inevitable mixture of good and evil shows that the institutional church does not mean safety for Augustine, but neither does it mean despair. Accepting its limitations, the church suffers under the struggle between good and evil, without exactly the demarcation between them. A church which is keen on judging and legislating finds no favour in Augustine's eyes: "In this time we are like those servants of whom it is said 'If you want, we will go and gather the darnel' (Mt. 13,28). Because, if it were possible, we would like nothing better than that nothing bad remain among the good. But we are told: 'Let them both grow together until harvest'. Why is this said? Because you are only human beings who can be mistaken. Listen: 'No, I fear that in gathering the darnel you might pull up the wheat at the same time'. And what good are you doing then? Won't you destroy my harvest in your exaggerated zeal?"⁶². The church of this time is a place of process and tolerance. Its most important task does not consist in judging, but in uniting people in Jesus Christ. Consequently, its first mission can be found only in the task of inviting and calling. Church is invitation. Its mission is that of the servant sent by his master in order to invite everyone, good and bad, to the Lord's banquet: "And the servants went out into the streets, and invited good and bad alike (Mt. 22,10) ... And see, the heard of the family comes in to make the guestis' acquaintance. Notice, sisters and brothers, that the servants had nothing else to do than to invite everyone and to bring in good and bad alike. It was not up to them to do more. Notice that it is not written: The servants came in to see the guests and they observed one person who was not dressed for a wedding and they told him that. That is not in the text, but the text runs as follows: The head of the family came in to see the guests and observed somebody without suitable dress. The heard of the family distinguishes between the guests and he expels the person without wedding-dress"⁶³.

The greatest victory for the church is to succeed in bringing unity to men, even at the cost of its own honour. The church ought not be concerned about honour, but about unity and love. "The church of Christ can give no greater proof of love than not being concerned

61. *In Iohannis evangelium tr. 4,4*: PL 35,1407.

62. *Serm. 73,4,4*: PL 38, 471-472.

63. *Serm. 90, 3-4*: PL 38,560. Cf. J. MOLTMANN, *Gott kommt und der Mensch wird frei* (München 1975) 24: "Zum Fest Jesu kann man nur einladen".

about the honour which it seems to possess in people's estimation. There is no greater proof of love than the effort of the church to prevent the division of the limbs of the baby [=image of the christian people] and to avoid lacerating the christian frailty by dissolving the unity" ⁶⁴.

In other words, the greatest victory of the church is love. "Where does the strength of this community of the church lie? Everyone who wants to understand the strength of this community must understand the strength of love. For love is a power which nobody can resist ... On this point love is like death. When death comes, nobody is able to resist it. With however many operations or remedies one fights against death, a mortal human being cannot escape its power. Likewise the world can do nothing against the power of love ... And just as death has all power to snatch us away from life, so love has all power to keep us alive" ⁶⁵.

Practical consequences of a choice

Sociologists today warn against relying too much on an ideally perfect picture of community and neglecting normal social relationships. Many relationships do not attain to the ideal, nor are they able to do so. They remain on the level of rather external communication, but such relations are by no means worthless. Values and ideas remain abstractions as long as they do not become real in ordinary daily behaviour ⁶⁶. This is also true for the community life of the church. One should not underestimate institutional elements, such as sacramental celebrations; often they are more important for the "common" believer than theologians think. Certainly, structures may never be absolutized, but on the other hand

64. *Serm.* 10,8: PL 38,96. Cf. *Serm.* 164,10,15: PL 38,902.

65. *Enarratio in Ps.* 47,13: PL 36,541. *Enarratio in Ps.* 120,12: PL 37,1615: "The church is to be loved because of our fellowmen, but God is to be loved because of Himself".

66. J. MATTHES, *Professional and common talk about God*, and K. DOBBELAERE, *The formation of a community and the church, ideology and empiricism seen from a sociological point of view*, Conferences held at the International Theological Congress "Faith and Society" Louvain 1976 (not yet published, but see G. DANNELS, "Le phénomène communautaire": *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 7 (1976) 329-336). K. DOBBELAERE is of the opinion that "the change-over from a church for the masses to a church of free choice gives rise to the problem of the credibility of the church. The overemphasizing of community formation within the church implies one-sidedness, is too heavily loaded with ideology, and has a selective tinge".

denying any significance to them amounts to overlooking very fundamental aspects of human existence. Man is not a merely spiritual being!

The choice of a "mixed" church can illustrate this very well, for such a choice is not without consequences for the practice of christian and ecclesiastical life. The choice of a mixed church meant for Augustine pursuing the course of a church for the masses, and not that of a church for the elite alone. He thereby distanced himself from his famous predecessors, Tertullian and Cyprian, who both had a more rigoristic conception of the church. Only against the background of a church for the masses and of a great esteem for institutional elements was Augustine able to promote infant baptism. Tertullian considered infant baptism, strictly speaking, as something absurd; the absence of personal faith in babies did not correspond to his dream of a church based on free and conscious commitment⁶⁷. We know also Augustine's supple attitude concerning the extremely severe practice of penance, more supple than that of most of his predecessors and contemporaries⁶⁸. He felt no difficulty with regard to the North African custom of babies in their mothers' arms receiving the eucharistic bread and wine. And his constant striving for christian unity exerted a great influence upon his attitude in ecumenical questions: the unity of the church was much more important for him than the honour of the *Catholica*. In the case of a possible reunion between Catholics and Donatists, Augustine declares himself willing to abdicate his episcopate in favour if a Donatist colleague, or to share the same basilica with a Donatist bishop, while each of them remains responsible for his own group of believers⁶⁹.

It is my conviction that the choice of a church for the elite or a church for the masses determines even now the positions that will be taken up in relation to modern problems, such as infant baptism, the age for reception of first communion, the age at which confirmation is to be conferred, strictness or leniency in the sacrament of reconciliation, the conditions relating to the sacrament of chris-

67. TERTULLIAN, *De baptismo* 18. Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina I, 293.

68. See A. M. LA BONNARDIÈRE, "Pénitence et réconciliation de pénitents d'après saint Augustin": *Revue des Etudes Augustiniennes* 13 (1967) 31-53; 249-283; 14 (1968) 181-204: "Dans tout l'enseignement de saint Augustin sur la pénitence, comme dans toutes les allusions qu'il est amené à faire aux institutions qu'elle a suscitées, la fréquence des images médicales l'emporte de beaucoup sur celle des images judiciaires" (202).

69. *De gestis cum Emerito* 5-7: PL 43, 700-703.

tian marriage, the conditions for receiving the anointing of the sick, and ecumenical decisions e. g. intercommunion. But one's conception of the church, which is at the basis of these positions, remains often unexamined. Many do not even realize that a certain ecclesiology influences their practical decisions. I do not at all want to plead for a blind return to Augustine's positions; history never repeats itself in exactly the same way. But I would like to plead for a more explicit consciousness of one's conception of the church, for that is what guides and determines the choice in practical decisions. Speaking about the church, it is important to know what kind of church you intend, and what expectations you have concerning the concrete life of the church.

Denis de Rougemont considers that decadence begins when people no longer ask "what will we do?", but "what will happen?". With the question "what will we do?" we determine to a certain extent the future because of our active expectations. But with the question "what will happen?" we resign ourselves to a situation which we undergo passively. With regard to our church, we can ask whether we are not too pre-occupied with problems, and too little with perspectives. But what can an individual do about questions with world-wide dimensions? I would answer that every change starts of mentality, and that it would be a mistake to suppose that on this point the individual is powerless. One word of truth can move the whole of mankind. Do we not see this happening every day? One person or a small group starts denouncing some discrimination — normally, one single person or a small group starts a revolution. They influence others, more or less successfully, and these ideas are taken over. We see that valuable ideas are being propagated and becoming common ideals. Why then would a change in our personal conception of the church not be able to bring about another church? It is true, this presupposes that there is always something to improve in the church. But was there any period in history — or will there ever be a period — when nothing is to be improved? *

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