

Practice Unto Virtue: The Role of Christian Practices in Virtue Formation

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Means of Grace: Augustine on Christian Practices and the Formation of Virtue

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In his preface to the 40th Anniversary edition of *The Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster wards off any lurking suspicions of “works righteousness” implicit in his project with his quip that the disciplines themselves can become the “means” by which God’s grace transforms us.¹ This phrase echoes early Christian accounts of the sacraments – especially Augustine of Hippo’s – and I think Foster is exactly right to extend the “means of grace” category to Christian practices generally.

Understanding how and when practices become means of grace is significant not only because of the worry about “works righteousness” in the church, but because we are living through a cultural resurgence of interest in habits and practices. Partly thanks to positive and popular psychology (see representative work by Martin Seligman and James Clear) and partly thanks to the powerlessness and captivity most of us feel in the face of digital distraction. Yet this resurgence is yoked to a “secular Pelagian” view of human nature: Pelagian in the sense that it sees human nature as basically good, or at least neutral about our capacity for free choice; and secular in the sense of being shorn of any larger teleological descriptions of human purpose or fulfillment. In this way the good life becomes a massive self-actualization project without recourse to any grand story or vision by which to transcend the self. The treadmill of self-optimization is a cruel master. The only guidelines for excellence are the individual’s own will, the experience of life satisfaction, and the comparative tools found in the contest for social approval. Here the self forms itself through right routines and life hacks. Given that we swim in this cultural current we can easily mistake or interpret the Christian celebration of discipline through this lens and ultimately do more spiritual harm than good, even if certain life outcomes are optimized or improved.

Can Christian practices do something that secular habit formation cannot? If so, how? In what follows, I turn to Augustine’s Incarnation-centered understanding of Christian practices to help us resist the temptations of secular Pelagianism and to reshape and guide how we can frame the

¹ Richard Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: HarperOne, 2018), ix.

disciplines for the Christian community today. I will briefly describe how this operates in Augustine's thought by looking at three specific practices (Bible reading, Sabbath, and friendship). Such practices are representative of an Augustinian account of the way Christian practices appropriate and communicate grace when they are adequately Incarnation-centered.

I. THE PELAGIAN TEMPTATION AND AUGUSTINE'S ALTERNATIVE

I.A. On Practices

There is a very important and helpful Aristotelian story about the process of practices becoming virtues that stands in the background of everything Augustine has to say about virtue and habituation and the way things – for good or ill – become second nature to us through repeated practice.²

One needs to be careful to not conflate good habits or practices (flossing, jogging, playing an instrument) with virtues themselves. What's the difference? A habit or practice is an activity that may be deemed healthy, praiseworthy, and generally associated with good life outcomes but is not yet virtue. Practices are morally "neutral" in the sense that good and evil people can do them and do them well. And while they may be part of the overall architecture of self-discipline and intentional living, they are not inherently oriented toward a morally good or bad end. Not so with the virtues. You cannot be "just" for the wrong reasons (e.g. for the sake of injustice or domination) and only certain practices are aimed at cultivating justice within. Thus, it always matters what virtues your practices are aimed at cultivating.

Virtue, according to Aristotle, is an activity of the soul in accordance with reason that with repeated practice creates a settled disposition to think, feel, and act in praiseworthy ways for the right reasons, at the right time, toward the right people, and for the right goals.³ Virtues speak to a whole person – thoughts, feelings, actions – and are situated in the cloth of a whole life that involves persons in the pursuit of happiness. For Augustine, love is the signature virtue and the virtue which all the other virtues are ultimately expressions of.⁴ Properly ordered love is

² Although Augustine only read Aristotle's *Categories* he is familiar with Aristotelian ethics through Peripatetic philosophers such as Antiochus of Ascalon who taught both Cicero and Varro and shaped Augustine's own thought through Augustine's reading of Cicero's *De finibus* and Varro's *De philosophia*. See *City of God*, 19.1-4.

³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 2.9 (1109a25).

⁴ "Moreover, even in this life, there is no virtue except that of loving what ought to be loved. Prudence consists in choosing that, courage in allowing no hardships, temperance in allowing no temptations, justice in allowing no pride, to divert one from it. What should we choose to love particularly, if not the one thing we can find that is unsurpassed? This is God; and if in loving anything else we make it preferable or equal to him, we have forgotten how to love ourselves. The nearer we approach to him, the better it is for us; for nothing is better than him. We approach him, however, not by moving, but by loving." Augustine, Letter 155.13.

Augustine's essential definition of virtue.⁵ Virtue is about learning to love the right things, in the right way, at the right time, for the right reasons, toward the right people, and toward the right ends. As a virtue, love has intellectual and affective elements, as well as practical and relational dimensions.

I.B. On Pagan Virtue

Even "after the Fall," Augustine thought that habitual practices could lead to certain settled dispositions that predispose us to act in morally praiseworthy ways. Perhaps the greatest example of Augustine's appreciation of "pagan virtue" is his comment about the Roman hero, Regulus, in Book 5 of *The City of God*.⁶ Regulus' repeated acts of bravery in the face of death turned him into the kind of person who was willing to sacrifice his own interests for the good of the community when it mattered most. Human beings do not simply wake up brave one day. Nor are they born noble and other-centered. This virtue requires a certain pattern of life, model of formation, regimented discipline, historical circumstances, willful intentionality, and determination to display heroic courage.

Yet Augustine famously says that even such an apparent virtue is ultimately not "true" or "real" because it fails in one, most significant, regard: it remains enclosed within the vicious circle of self-love. For the ancient Roman, this might mean it remains hostage to one's own lust for fame or recognition (socially-conferred glory). For another person it may be a beautiful but ultimately self-referential attempt to gain approval or expiate oneself from failure in the past. Whatever the case, such virtues fail not at the structural level – but at the level of intellectual content, affective motivation, and self-knowledge. Augustine thought only the Christian faith had the resources through which one could cultivate true virtue. Why? Because real virtues, in Augustine's view, are *gifts* from God. This is as true of the theological virtues (faith, hope, and love) as the cardinal ones (prudence, temperance, courage, and justice). True virtue is a form of God's grace.

I.C. The Pelagian Temptation

Augustine's critique of "pagan virtue" is as much about paganism as it is about Pelagianism. After the sack of Rome in 410 AD many aristocratic Christians fled the city and returned to their estates in North Africa where Augustine encountered their Pelagian teaching directly. Augustine concluded that Pelagianism represented a fundamentally pagan, Stoic account of the human condition and free power of the will.

⁵ "It seems to me that a brief and true definition of virtue is 'rightly ordered love.'" Augustine, *City of God* 15.22.

⁶ Augustine, *The City of God*, 5.18.

Augustine's worry is not merely a matter of optimism about the goodness of human nature or the freedom of the will but a dispute about whether the soul can know and love what is truly good – whether it can achieve virtue – without Christ's mediation.⁷ For Augustine, God, the good, is only knowable through the mystery or *sacrament* of the Incarnation.⁸ Thus, there can be no true virtue without Christ's mediated grace. Augustine's own writings reveal that the Pelagian temptation, is not simply to moral optimism or an overly rosy theological anthropology, it is a Christological error: it assumes the soul has access to what it needs for virtue within itself, without the mediation of the Incarnate Word. Pelagianism is fundamentally the view that the tools for self-formation are already in hand – and grace may assist, but does not fundamentally *constitute* the virtuous life.

I.D. Augustine's Alternative

Virtue exceeds our grasp, according to Augustine, and must ultimately be received rather than mastered. Christian practices, then, ought to inculcate skills of receptivity. How do practices do this? They must be framed within the horizon of the mystery of the Incarnation. For Augustine, Christ is uniquely both the *example* and *sacrament* of virtue itself – that is, his life is both a pattern to be followed and a sacred signpost that when believed in, hoped upon, and longed for becomes a conduit of God's grace to our souls. It is only in this double path of example and sacrament that we can understand what it means to practice our faith.

Augustine thought Pelagianism drastically underestimated the enduring and significant consequences of original sin in the human soul: ignorance and weakness.⁹ The soul does not simply choose badly, it cannot see clearly what the good is and when it glimpses it, it lacks the strength to pursue it.¹⁰ This double incapacity is a deficit not merely of technique but of vision and desire that no technique can repair. In contemporary terms we might say that the self cannot optimize itself – for it cannot even accurately perceive what it wants. The way our vision is restored and desire reordered is only by the medicine of God's grace. The Incarnation both models humility and invites us into self-knowledge, exposing our condition (as those in need of mercy) and declaring the happy news of God's provision. All Christian practices must begin and end in this twofold movement of confession and reception. This is not to reduce all Christian practice to an eternal repetition of the

⁷ See book 4 of *De Trinitate*. On the date of book 4 and its connection to Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings in the years 411-415 AD, see Robert Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2004), 156n40.

⁸ By sacrament Augustine means an intelligible word, sign or symbol that has the power to mysteriously convey grace to the individual's soul when it is adequately understood. See Augustine, *Contra Faustum*, 19.16. The New Testament Greek word *mysterium* is translated as *sacramentum* in the Latin Vulgate – famously in Ephesians 5:32 where marriage is called a “profound mystery” (*magnum sacramentum*). This is Augustine's jumping off point for thinking very broadly about the economy of signs that can direct us to God and deliver his grace to us. For a helpful explanation of *mysterium* and *sacramentum* in Augustine's thought, see Dodaro, 151.

⁹ See Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*.

¹⁰ The significance of Romans 7 for Augustine's understanding of these twin consequences of original sin and the way they shape our struggle to cultivate virtue cannot be overstated. In the context of his conversion, see Augustine's *Confessions* Books 7-8.

sinner's prayer, but rather a dynamic entrance into the move of God's Spirit, continually offering the divine love received to others in the context of our own lives and callings.

The Incarnation is an *example* which when grasped – in the mysterious, “through a glass darkly” way that we comprehend God in this life – communicates the gift that it signifies to our souls in the form of both divine pardon and power to imitate Christ's example. To explore what an Incarnation-centered view of Christian practices looks like, let us turn to three that Augustine himself was fond of: Bible reading, Sabbath, and friendship.

II. THREE PRACTICES: SCRIPTURE, SABBATH, AND FRIENDSHIP

II.A. The Practice of Reading Scripture

In the first book of *On Christian Teaching* Augustine argues that the most fundamental hermeneutical principle – the key way that we can judge whether an interpretation is sound or not – is whether the reading leads us to more fully obey the command to love God with our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves.¹¹ The Bible itself is God's *oratorio* – a masterful rhetorical performance through which the soul is invited to more fully know and love God and to know and receive his love for us. Yet this communication is shrouded in darkness and mystery in order to stretch the reader's soul and elicit the kind of trusting, faithful reliance required of true lovers. All Bible reading – all interpretation of the many signs (words are signposts of things, for Augustine) must be anchored in and revolve around the significance of *the Sign-Which-is-also-the-Thing*, the Word made flesh, the Incarnation.

In terms of reading the Bible as a practice for virtue cultivation, Augustine says we are to read it in search of exemplars: virtuous saints who exemplify Christ-centered virtue both in imitation of divine love and, importantly, in the ways that these characters model a confessional and humble receptivity to divine mercy and strength. In this way, earthen-vested heroes like David, Peter, Paul, and Mary Magdalene are highest exemplars – models of a kind of penitence and limitation which we don't see modeled in Christ. Our meditative reading of such stories is itself a sacramental act. With these exemplars we join the whole church's sigh of pilgrimage: “forgive us our sins and we forgive those who sinned against us.”¹² Our righteousness in this life is more about the forgiveness of sins than the perfection of virtue and these heroes embody this.¹³

Reading the Bible has the added benefit of directly addressing the “ignorance” problem of original sin in our souls. The very process of knowing the good, in Augustine's mind, is much more closely

¹¹ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, Book 1.

¹² Augustine, *The City of God*. 19.27.

¹³ Augustine, *The City of God*. 19.27.

akin to hermeneutics – the patient careful work of reading and being read by Scripture – than it is to working out a logical syllogism. This interpretive work provides the necessary resistance to stretch our souls and to teach us to vulnerably trust – and in so doing prepares our souls to receive the gift of virtue.

II.B. The Practice of Sabbath

What about practices that are less rich with the specific content of the Incarnation or words of Scripture? How do other practices participate in the Incarnation and become means of grace? Let's look at Sabbath. The Sabbath, or seventh day, is a twenty-four hour period of time set aside for rest and contemplation of God and his law – commanded by God at Sinai. The Sabbath is one of Augustine's favorite practices because it structurally embodies the kind of *negative* capability at the heart of a truly Christ-shaped view of spiritual practice. Jesus' confrontation with the religious leaders of his own day reveal how even a practice oriented toward receptivity and rest can become burdensome and perverted by pride and self-righteousness. Jesus reminds them that "the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27).¹⁴

In Augustine's mind, only when the Sabbath is interpreted within the horizon of the Incarnation – of God's redeeming love and promised power – can we practice it in a way that communicates the grace of true rest and joy to our souls. Sabbath in the frame of Incarnation is a response to Jesus' invitation: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30). Such rest is not merely physical but spiritual and existential – freedom from the gnawing incompleteness that haunts all our longings and the treadmill that our disordered desire imposes on us. The path of liberation is not merely a long nap or crockpot dinner – although these have their place – but must begin in the truth of God's forgiveness and love declared for us in Jesus Christ and poured into us through the presence of the Holy Spirit. In the Gospels Jesus is presented as Lord of the Sabbath (Matthew 12:8). Augustine goes so far as to call Jesus Christ our "true Sabbath" – the soul's longed for rest accomplished in Christ's death and resurrection. Augustine makes a great deal of the Sabbath as signpost of heaven (Hebrews 4:1-11) and concludes his two greatest works – *Confessions* and *The City of God* – with a meditation on that eternal Sabbath day.¹⁵

The practice of Sabbath becomes sacramental when it structures our weekly rhythm – ordering our bodily habits of time, work, and attention – and invites us to the inner and eternal sabbath offered in Christ. Here the practice gains new significance that reinforces the goodness of the mundane weekly practice, not as a burden of self-righteousness or life hack for reset but as a gift we give

¹⁴ All Biblical references are to the NIV translation.

¹⁵ See Augustine, *Confessions* 13.35-38 and *City of God* 22.30.

ourselves to remind us of a much greater gift. We are literally plugging into our calendar a “do not schedule” block that reminds us that the heart of our relationship with God is not about what we do. Sabbath is a negative practice that cultivates an inner reminder to rest and to rejoice. This is like reminding yourself to go look at your newborn sleeping in the bedroom (even if the newborn is now seven years old).

All spiritual practices ought to be Sabbath-like: not heroic displays of self-mastery but exercises in the “negative capability” of rest – the soul’s ability to wait, listen, and receive that which we are not in control of and most of the time not even in search of.¹⁶ And they ought to order our lives around the memory of God’s forgiveness and mercy.

The Christian practice of Sabbath stacks the memory of God’s rest on the seventh day of creation (Genesis 2:2), Exodus liberation (Exodus 20:8-11), Jesus’ invitation (Matthew 11:28-30), and the promise of eternal rest (Hebrews 4:1-11) – all interpreted through the example-sacrament of Christ’s Incarnation. Sabbath is a way to pattern our week around the tending of this memory.

Sabbath directly addresses the “weakness” problem of original sin in our souls in relation to virtue cultivation. It addresses our compulsion to hide our weakness in self-sufficiency and instead foregrounds the practice of self-limitation whereby we learn to see limits as gifts. It is ultimately a practice of receptivity rather than mastery, of humility rather than domination. If we ever master the practice of Sabbath, we will have lost sight of its gifts.

The Sabbath also speaks to another key dimension of Christ-centered practice. Practices ought to invite our souls into an experience of the for-its-own-sake-ness of life. Our secular culture is a non-teleological landscape: a world without finality, completeness, or ultimate fulfillment. It is a world without ends-in-themselves. A world of instrumentality that cannot register how certain practices and experiences attune us to transcendent purpose. That is, we have no shared account of how playing a good game of cards with your children, or sauntering through your spouse’s flower garden, or enjoying a meandering conversation about life with your neighbor are not merely distractions but are often *the point*. The church ought to be a place that celebrates such practices as resistance to the tyranny of everything always needing to add up and lead to something bigger or bigger. Such practices are not always super sexy. They can feel quite dull. But they are essential. Sabbath is a training for this kind of vision.

¹⁶ Simone Weil frequently echoes this Augustinian instinct: “We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them.” See Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper, 2009).

II.C. The Practice of Friendship

What does an Incarnation-centered approach to friendship look like – one that turns it into a means of grace in our lives? Friendship as spiritual practice involves many of the negative capabilities of rest, receptivity, self-defeat, and humility – as well as an experience of for-its-own-sake-ness – that we explored in the practice of Sabbath.

Friendship introduces another critical element of practices as means of grace: the irreducibly relational, social dimension of virtue.

At the heart of the Incarnation is the relational exchange of love – the givenness of divine love in the form of pardon for sin and power through God’s Spirit and the receptive exchange of our thanks and praise. Friendship with other human beings is the spiritual practice that most closely resembles this exchange, and sustaining it requires the formation of a community of mutuality, secure attachment, and delight that mirrors God’s Triune life. Such communities are signposts of the Incarnation’s continuing presence on earth, the ongoing work of assuming human nature. Augustine emphasizes the beautiful variety and forms that such friendship can take. We are encircled in every direction by birth, family, marriage, work, church, monastery, and more. And sometimes we are given the gift of particular friendships that seem to transcend all of these other circles entirely.¹⁷

Friendship is the ultimate “penultimate” end-in-itself. When it is true and authentic it is an end-in-itself even as it propels us on toward our truest end. It is not only a vehicle but it is also a foretaste. Friendship is a paradigmatic practice in Augustine’s mind because it concretizes the shadowy, mysterious friendship we have with God. When understood as a sacramental participation and expression of divine love, the accepting gaze and joyful embrace of a best friend communicates grace to us more profoundly than all of the other practices combined. Without the context of healthy friendship, other spiritual practices are unable to gain traction in our souls and transform us. If you had to boil Augustine’s advice on the spiritual life down to one word, it would be friendship. It is the clearest sign and foretaste of the eternal happiness to which all practices and virtues ultimately aim.

In friendship the practices of spending time together, communicating with one another, playing games together, cooking or drinking beer together, giving and receiving gifts, putting a fence up together, and forgiving one another all seem to fade into the background of the relationship itself. Even calling such things “practices” would sound calculating and cold. The aim of relational intimacy or partnership – which is not often thought of in an abstract way apart from the fabric of life shared together – is what sustains the practice in an almost automatic way. Only in moments of

¹⁷ I follow out this theme of the circles of friendship in *Discerning the Good in Letters and Sermons of Augustine* (New York: Oxford UP, 2016).

extreme rupture, suffering, distance, or change do the habits of friendship become practices in an abstract sense that must be employed intentionally.

To imagine that God, in Christ, no longer calls us slaves but friends (John 15:15) is a great gift that we can mysteriously and partially receive through the sign of earthly friendships. Such friendships expand, extend, and repair our damaged self-love which is wrapped tightly around our will. At the highest-level, virtue is about our capacity for friendship, even with those who are our enemies or who have wronged us or who can offer us nothing in return. In such cases we experience our own selves becoming the means of God's grace for others. One cannot overstate how irreducibly relational Augustine's vision of the moral and spiritual life is.

III. THE CHURCH AS SCHOOL OF GRACE

Practices are inherently routine, sometimes dull, often unglamorous, and must be embedded in the hiddenness of one's life. The context is always the local, embodied forms of friendship that radiate out from us like concentric circles and find their convergence in the singular circle of friendship found in the body of Christ. The sub-culture of ancient Pelagianism – that which Augustine railed so hard against – included a sense of spiritual athleticism, elitism, heroism, and celebrity. We must be on guard against all such temptations and resist using such allure as motivation for the practice of Christianity. A character-driven approach to the reading the Bible, diligent celebration of Sabbath, and devotion to the practice of friendship are three worn paths to follow. Practice these three in the sacramental landscape of the church's worship (alongside eucharist, baptism, and preaching) and you have a solid recipe for discipleship.

III.A. Church as Place to Reckon Your Virtues as Gifts

The gift that the church can offer our culture in this moment of renewed interest in habits is to provide a communal embodiment of a grace-shaped, Incarnation-centered approach to spiritual practices. An approach that sees the practices as inherently social in ways that free us from our hyper-individualism and loneliness. It is not until we fully reckon with the truth that our virtues themselves are inherently gifts that we can finally draw close to one another.

The high water mark of spiritual formation is to experience your own virtues as gifts and your own self as an extension of God's gift to others. The Pelagian error in Augustine's mind was not only pride about our own virtues but the critical and judgmental spirit that necessarily accompanies such pride. The vice of pride includes this spirit because we are inwardly – consciously or unconsciously – aware of our own failures and thus we must continually reassure ourselves of our superiority over others. Augustine spends a lot of his later writings defending “mediocre” Christian practices (e.g. marriage and charitable giving) in the face of a Pelagian fixation on the heroic, renunciatory

practices of poverty and celibacy.¹⁸ Augustine wants to retain the splendor of the “counsels of perfection” (rooted in Jesus’ encounter with Rich Young Ruler in Matthew 19:16-22 and Paul’s comments about celibacy in 1 Corinthians 7) even while reminding believers that such practices and heroic virtues can easily be spoiled by pride (*superbia*).

The vulnerability of Christian practices generally is that they begin with an effort of will, a voluntary intention on our part. And it is this sense of self-assertion that we are sometimes unable to overcome and that blocks us from receiving the divine love that we so desperately need. Often we don’t need more and better practices, resolutions, or disciplines but an interruption – sometimes even violent – that forces us to reckon with our need for divine grace. This is why the involuntary experience of suffering or confrontation with our own failure is often more salutary and transformative than years of spiritual practice. The Gospel demands that we not lose sight of this. Flannery O’Connor’s short stories are perhaps the most brilliant and entertaining meditations on this hard truth about spiritual growth. The climactic and closing vision of Ruby Turpin in “Revelation” is perhaps my favorite disruption. Mrs. Turpin is a middle-class, white Southern woman whose pride is blinding her to her own need and alienating her from those around her.

At last she lifted her head. There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. She raised her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud [her husband], had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. *Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.* She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the [hog] pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile.

At length she got down and turned off the faucet and made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but

¹⁸ See R.A. Markus, “Augustine: A Defense of Christian Mediocrity,” in *The End of Ancient Christianity* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2012).

what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.¹⁹ (emphasis mine)

For Augustine, humility is the ground of all the other virtues. Virtue cultivation begins and ends in humility. That which we mistook as our own accomplishments, that which we used to distinguish ourselves from others, that which we used to fuel our own illusions of superiority, will ultimately be burned away in the purifying fire of God's love. For the church to become a sacramental sign it ought to foreshadow this humility and self-giveness. We ought to work to prevent ourselves from being too shocked when our virtues burned away.

III.B. The Church as School of Grace

For all of Augustine's emphasis on the unconditional grace of God, he never tires of exhorting his congregation to practice the faith diligently:

It is the task of Christians daily to make progress toward God, and always to rejoice in God or in his gifts. For the time of our pilgrimage, our wandering in exile, is extremely short, and in our home country time does not exist. There is a considerable difference, after all, between eternity and time. Here devotion is required of you, there you take your rest. For that reason, like good traders, let us note every day how we have got on, what profit we have made. You see, we have to be not only attentive at listening, but vigilantly active as well. This is a school in which God is the only teacher, and it demands good students, ones who are keen in attendance, not only who play hooky. The apostle says, "Unflagging in keenness, fervent in spirit, rejoicing in hope" (Rom 12:11-12). So in this school, brothers and sisters, we learn something every day. We learn something from the commandments, something from examples, something from sacraments. These things are remedies for our wounds, material for our studies.²⁰

Note the strenuous language in this passage – devotion, progress, activity, unflagging keenness. Note that the material for our study in the school of virtue (the commands of Scripture, exemplary lives, and sacraments) is not only fodder for study but medicine for our diseases. This pairing of "material for our studies" and "remedies for our wounds" perfectly captures the Augustinian approach to practices and the necessary tension by which they become "means of grace." If we forget our condition, and the greatness of our cure, we are in danger of a kind of Pelagianism that damages our capacity to receive the gift of God himself.

¹⁹ Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation" in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971). The N-word appears throughout O'Connor's writings and I've left it here. The word often appears, as it does here in "Revelation," in a jarring movement of moral critique and spiritual urgency.

²⁰ Augustine, Sermon 16A.1.

In Augustine's mind, Christian practices become means of grace when they are adequately Incarnation-centered. The church becomes the site of this grace-shaped formation when it remembers its vocation as both rigorous school and merciful ward for wound-healing. Our own self-optimized and therapeutized culture is longing for a way to understand how virtue-cultivation and soul-healing relate to one another. The sign of Christ's Incarnation points the way toward what we are all truly longing for. The secular Pelagian habit-formation project of our own day mistakes restlessness for a problem to be solved through better routines. The church can teach us that our restlessness is a gift – a manifestation of the soul's longing for God – which practices are meant to serve and channel until our restless hearts find their rest in him.