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THE WORKS OF
SAINT AUGUSTINE

*A Translation
for the 21st Century*

SERMONS

THE WORKS OF SAINT AUGUSTINE
A Translation for the 21st Century

SERMONS

III/6
(184-229Z)
on the Liturgical Seasons

translation and notes
Edmund Hill, O.P.

editor
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SERMON 227

PREACHED ON THE HOLY DAY OF EASTER
TO THE *INFANTES*, ON THE SACRAMENTS

Date: 414-415¹

You are yourselves what you receive

I haven't forgotten my promise. I had promised those of you who have just been baptized a sermon to explain the sacrament of the Lord's table, which you can see right now, and which you shared in last night. You ought to know what you have received, what you are about to receive, what you ought to receive every day. That bread which you can see on the altar, sanctified by the word of God, is the body of Christ.² That cup, or rather what the cup contains, sanctified by the word of God, is the blood of Christ. It was by means of these things that the Lord Christ wished to present us with his body and blood, which he shed for our sake for the forgiveness of sins. If you receive them well, you are yourselves what you receive. You see, the apostle says, *We, being many, are one loaf, one body* (1 Cor 10:17). That's how he explained the sacrament of the Lord's table; one loaf, one body, is what we all are, many though we be.

In this loaf of bread you are given clearly to understand how much you should love unity. I mean, was that loaf made from one grain? Weren't there many grains of wheat? But before they came into the loaf they were all separate; they were joined together by means of water after a certain amount of pounding and crushing. Unless wheat is ground, after all, and moistened with water, it can't possibly get into this shape which is called bread. In the same way you too were being ground and pounded, as it were, by the humiliation of fasting and the sacrament of exorcism. Then came baptism, and you were, in a manner of speaking, moistened with water in order to be shaped into bread. But it's not yet bread without fire to bake it. So what does fire represent? That's the chrism, the anointing. Oil, the fire-feeder, you see, is the sacrament of the Holy Spirit.

Notice it, when the Acts of the Apostles are read; the reading of that book begins now, you see. Today begins the book which is called the Acts of the Apostles. Anybody who wishes to make progress has the means of doing so. When you assemble in church, put aside silly stories³ and concentrate on the scriptures. We here are your books.⁴ So pay attention, and see how the Holy

Spirit is going to come at Pentecost. And this is how he will come; he will show himself in tongues of fire. You see, he breathes into us the charity which should set us on fire for God, and have us think lightly of the world, and burn up our straw, and purge and refine our hearts like gold. So the Holy Spirit comes, fire after water, and you are baked into the bread which is the body of Christ. And that's how unity is signified.

Now you have the sacraments in the order they occur.⁵ First, after the prayer,⁶ you are urged to lift up your hearts; that's only right for the members of Christ. After all, if you have become members of Christ, where is your head?⁷ Members have a head. If the head hadn't gone ahead before, the members would never follow. Where has our head gone? What did you give back in the creed? *On the third day he rose again from the dead, he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father.* So our head is in heaven. That's why, after the words *Lift up your hearts*, you reply, *We have lifted them up to the Lord.*

And you mustn't attribute it to your own powers, your own merits, your own efforts, this lifting up of your hearts to the Lord, because it's God's gift that you should have your heart up above. That's why the bishop, or the presbyter who's offering, goes on to say, when the people have answered *We have lifted them up to the Lord*, why he goes on to say, *Let us give thanks to the Lord our God*, because we have lifted up our hearts. Let us give thanks, because unless he had enabled us to lift them up, we would still have our hearts down here on earth. And you signify your agreement by saying, *It is right and just* to give thanks to the one who caused us to lift up our hearts to our head.

Then, after the consecration of the sacrifice of God, because he wanted us to be ourselves his sacrifice, which is indicated by where that sacrifice was first put, that is the sign of the thing that we are;⁸ why, then after the consecration is accomplished, we say the Lord's prayer, which you have received and given back. After that comes the greeting, *Peace be with you*, and Christians kiss one another with a holy kiss. It's a sign of peace; what is indicated by the lips should happen in the conscience; that is, just as your lips approach the lips of your brothers or sisters, so your heart should not be withdrawn from theirs.

So they are great sacraments and signs, really serious and important sacraments. Do you want to know how their seriousness is impressed on us? The apostle says, *Whoever eats the body of Christ or drinks the blood of the Lord unworthily is guilty of the body and blood of the Lord* (1 Cor 11:27). What is receiving unworthily? Receiving with contempt, receiving with derision. Don't let yourselves think that what you can see is of no account. What you can see passes away, but the invisible reality signified does not pass away, but remains. **Look, it's received, it's eaten, it's consumed. Is the body of Christ consumed, is the Church of Christ consumed, are the members of Christ consumed?**⁹ Perish the thought! Here they are being purified, there they will be crowned with the victor's laurels. So what is signified will remain eternally, although the thing that signifies it seems to pass away. So receive the sacrament in such a way that you think about yourselves, that you retain unity in your hearts, that you always fix your hearts up above. Don't let your hope be placed on earth, but in heaven.

Let your faith be firm in God, let it be acceptable to God. Because what you don't see now, but believe, you are going to see there, where you will have joy without end.

NOTES

1. This date is my compromise between those proposed by two authorities who are usually in perfect accord: Fischer, who suggests 412-413, and Kunzelmann who favors 416-417. The sermon, though primarily on the eucharist, explains all three "sacraments of initiation": baptism, confirmation, and eucharist.

2. Evidently the sermon was preached just before communion, after the great eucharistic prayer, or canon of the Mass.

3. Presumably he means pagan myths; but possibly also various popular superstitions or naive misconceptions about the sacraments or the Holy Spirit.

4. When we read the scriptures aloud, the books of the illiterate?

5. He is going on to talk about the Mass, from the preface onward. So here by "sacraments" he seems to mean the successive stages of the eucharistic prayer, beginning with the exchange between celebrant and people which opens the preface; here each utterance appears to be a "sacrament."

6. What we now call the intercessions, or prayers of the faithful.

7. We have to remember that *membrum* in Latin still meant primarily a limb or organ of the body, whereas in English it is the metaphorical sense of "member" that has become the ordinary meaning: member of an organization, institute, or society.

8. The text is overloaded and corrupt here. As far as "because he wanted us to be ourselves his sacrifice" all is plain. Then it continues—I leave out variously suggested punctuations—*quod demonstratum est ubi impostum est primum illud sacrificium Dei et nos id est signum rei quod sumus*. I have simply omitted *Dei et nos* after the second *sacrificium*. I am guessing that "where the sacrifice was first put" refers to the offertory, and that this somehow indicated that the offerings represented the people's offering of themselves.

For the same doctrine that we are also the sacrifice or victim being offered in the Mass, see *The City of God*, X,6.

9. Notice how his thought does not linger on the real presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements, but passes straight to the ultimate meaning of the eucharist, the ultimate grace signified by Christ's body and blood in the sacrament, namely the unity of the body of Christ which is the Church, and our living incorporation into it. He doesn't deny the real presence, as was later thought by, for example, some of the Protestant reformers. But he knows that it is only, so to say, the middle stage of the sacrament, what Saint Thomas Aquinas calls the *res et sacramentum*, the thing signified by the visible celebration, which is itself also the sacrament, that is the sign, of a further thing. It is this further thing, what Saint Thomas calls the *res tantum*, the ultimate thing or grace signified, that always interests Augustine. And the grace of the eucharist is the unity of the body of Christ and our participation in it. The real presence of Christ under the appearances of bread and wine has the same place in this sacrament as the baptismal character has in baptism: a kind of half-way stage, or middle level, in the sacramental mystery of grace.

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SERMON 272

ON THE DAY OF PENTECOST
TO THE *INFANTES*, ON THE SACRAMENT

Date: 408¹

One thing is seen, another is to be understood

What you can see on the altar, you also saw last night; but what it was, what it meant, of what great reality it contained the sacrament, you had not yet heard. So what you can see, then, is bread and a cup; that's what even your eyes tell you; but as for what your faith asks to be instructed about, the bread is the body of Christ, the cup the blood of Christ. It took no time to say that indeed, and that, perhaps, may be enough for faith; but faith desires instruction. The prophet says, you see, *Unless you believe, you shall not understand* (Is 7:9). I mean, you can now say to me, "You've bidden us believe; now explain, so that we may understand."

Some such thought as this, after all, may cross somebody's mind: "We know where our Lord Jesus Christ took flesh from; from the Virgin Mary. He was suckled as a baby, was reared, grew up, came to man's estate, suffered persecution from the Jews, was hung on the tree, was slain on the tree, was taken down from the tree, was buried; rose again on the third day, on the day he wished ascended into heaven. That's where he lifted his body up to; that's where he's going to come from to judge the living and the dead; that's where he is now, seated on the Father's right. How can bread be his body? And the cup, or what the cup contains, how can it be his blood?"

The reason these things, brothers and sisters, are called sacraments is that in them one thing is seen, another is to be understood. What can be seen has a bodily appearance, what is to be understood provides spiritual fruit. So if you want to understand the body of Christ, listen to the apostle telling the faithful, *You, though, are the body of Christ and its members* (1 Cor 12:27). So if it's you that are the body of Christ and its members, it's the mystery meaning you that has been placed on the Lord's table; what you receive is the mystery that means you. It is to what you are that you reply *Amen*, and by so replying you express your assent. What you hear, you see, is *The body of Christ*,² and you answer, *Amen*. So be a member of the body of Christ, in order to make that *Amen* true.³

So why in bread? Let's not bring anything of our own to bear here, let's go on listening to the apostle himself, who said, when speaking of this sacrament, *One bread, one body, we being many are* (1 Cor 10:17). Understand and rejoice. Unity, truth, piety, love. *One bread*; what is this one bread? The one body which we, being many, are. Remember that bread is not made from one grain, but from many. When you were being exorcised, it's as though you were being ground. When you were baptized it's as though you were mixed into dough.⁴ When you received the fire of the Holy Spirit,⁵ it's as though you were baked. Be what you can see, and receive what you are.

That's what the apostle said about the bread. He has already shown clearly enough what we should understand about the cup, even if it wasn't said. After all, just as many grains are mixed into one loaf in order to produce the visible appearance of bread, as though what holy scripture says about the faithful were happening: *They had one soul and one heart in God* (Acts 4:32); so too with the wine. Brothers and sisters, just remind yourselves what wine is made from; many grapes hang in the bunch, but the juice of the grapes is poured together in one vessel. That too is how the Lord Christ signified us, how he wished us to belong to him, how he consecrated the sacrament of our peace and unity on his table. Any who receive the sacrament of unity, and do not hold the bond of peace, do not receive the sacrament for their benefit, but a testimony against themselves.

Turning to the Lord, God the Father almighty, with pure hearts let us give him sincere and abundant thanks, as much as we can in our littleness; beseeching him in his singular kindness with our whole soul, graciously to hearken to our prayers in his good pleasure; also by his power to drive out the enemy from our actions and thoughts, to increase our faith, to guide our minds, to grant us spiritual thoughts, and to lead us finally to his bliss; through Jesus Christ his Son. Amen.⁶

NOTES

1. Fischer, Kunzelmann, and Monceaux actually suggest between 405 and 411. Several eminent scholars think this sermon was preached at Easter, not Pentecost. The Maurists, however, accept the evidence of all the manuscripts—all they had access too, that is—in assigning it to Pentecost. There is no reason why it should not have been preached at Pentecost; it was the time for solemn baptisms as well as Easter. The sermon can scarcely have been preached anywhere else but in Augustine's own Church of Hippo Regius.

2. At the administration of communion, presumably.

3. *Amen*, of course, means "True."

4. Because water is added to the flour to make dough. This is suggested more obviously by the Latin *conspersi estis*, since *conspargo* means to sprinkle or moisten.

5. Confirmation, anointing with chrism.

6. See Sermon 15A, note 12, for this concluding prayer; but the text will first be found at the end of Sermon 67, not Sermon 34.

Augustinus von Hippo (354-430)
EXPOSITIONS ON THE BOOK OF PSALMS
(ENARRATIONES IN PSALMOS (CCEL))

Expositions on the Book of Psalms.

Psalm XXXIV.

1.

Because there was there a sacrifice after the order of Aaron, and afterwards He of His Own Body and Blood appointed a sacrifice after the order of Melchizedek; He changed then His Countenance in the Priesthood, and sent away the kingdom of the Jews, and came to the Gentiles. What then is, "He affected"? ¹ He was full of affection. For what is so full of affection as the Mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, seeing our infirmity, that He might deliver us from everlasting death, underwent temporal death with such great injury and contumely? "And He drummed:" because a drum is not made, except when a skin is extended on wood; and David drummed, to signify that Christ should be crucified. But, "He drummed upon the doors of the city:" what are "the doors of the city," but our hearts which we had closed against Christ, who by the drum of His Cross hath opened the hearts of mortal men? "And was carried in His Own Hands:" how "carried in His Own Hands"? Because when He commended His Own Body and Blood, He took into His Hands that which the faithful know; and in a manner carried Himself, when He said, "This is My Body." ² "And He fell down at the doors of the gate;" that is, He humbled Himself. For this it is, to fall down even at the very beginning of our faith. For the door of the gate is the beginning of faith; whence beginneth the Church, and arriveth at last even unto sight: that as it believeth those things which it seeth not, it may deserve to enjoy them, when it shall have begun to see face to face. So is the title of the Psalm; briefly we have heard it; let us now hear the very words of Him that affecteth, and drummeth upon the doors of the city.

1. [1 Sam. xxi. 13. He follows the Septuagint, which differs from the Vulgate.--C.] [↵](#)

2. Matt. xxvi. 26. [↵](#)

