

# Almsgiving to Oneself: The Development of the Idea of Self-love in Augustine<sup>1</sup>

## RESUMEN

Este escrito analiza la posible evolución de la idea de amor-propio en la obra literaria de San Agustín, focalizando su argumentación en la precedencia del amor-propio sobre el amor a nuestro prójimo, comparando ambos amores en los primeros escritos y sermones; y más tarde equiparándolos. La autora analiza la progresión de Agustín al usar algunos textos con cita de pasajes bíblicos. Este estudio trata de aclarar (clarificar) que el obispo de Hipona desarrolló su idea de amor-propio basado en su interpretación (presupuesto) del pecado original y la significación (sentido) de la muerte de Cristo. La autora también presta atención a los estudios precedentes (especialmente el de Oliver O'Donovan en 1880 y el de Anthony Dupont en 2007) y contribuye a profundizar en los análisis de sus precursores.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Agustín de Hipona, amor-propio, pecado original.

## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the possibility of the development of the idea of self-love in St. Augustine's work, by focusing on Augustine's argument on the precedence of self-love to love for our neighbor both in his comparatively early writings and sermons and later ones. The author analyzes the change of Augustine's usage of some words and of citation of Bible passages. This paper clarifies that Augustine developed his idea of self-love based on his understanding of original sin and the meaning of the death of Christ. The author also pays attention to preceding studies (especially Oliver O'Donovan's (1980) and Anthony Dupont's (2007)), and contributes to deepening their examinations.

**KEY WORDS:** Augustine of Hippo, self-love, original sin.

«You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with your soul and with your mind,»<sup>2</sup> and, «you shall love your neighbor as yourself.»<sup>3</sup> These phrases in the Bible are the basis of Augustine's theology of love. In many works, Augustine discusses the two commandments of love, namely love for God and love for neighbor. Augustine doesn't often quote these bible phrases in his very earlier works, but we find the expression «*dilectio dei et proximi*» in some arguments.<sup>4</sup> In *De vera religione*, he quotes the bible's phrase itself, and mentions also love for ourselves/self-love,<sup>5</sup> which is implied in the saying «love your neighbor as yourself.» Regarding self-love, Augustine allots a part of discussion in the first book of *De doctrina Christiana*.<sup>6</sup> Augustine argues there that «so what human beings have to be instructed in is precisely the way in which we are to love ourselves so as to benefit from it.»<sup>7</sup> In these arguments in *vera rel.* and *doc. Chr.*, Augustine discusses the intimate relationship of love for neighbor and self-love (and love for God, of course), but he doesn't clearly explain the order of them, that is, which love precedes the other. However, in his comparatively later works and in some works whose dates are uncertain, Augustine interprets the phrase «you shall love your neighbor as yourself» as showing the right order of love and gives voice that we should, first of all, love ourselves. In some of these works, Augustine also argues that to love ourselves is to give alms to ourselves. In this paper, I focus on Augustine's discussion about self-love, and examine the possibility of development of his idea of self-love.

## 1. ATTENTION TO SELF-LOVE

In the beginning, let us see *Sermo 90A*.<sup>8</sup> It includes the argument that love for neighbor presupposes self-love. Augustine

1 This paper is a revised version of my paper «Almsgiving to Oneself: An Examination of Augustine's Interpretation of the Order of Love» presented in Asia-Pacific Early Christian Studies Society, 10th Annual Conference, 2016.

2 Dt. 6, 5; 10, 12; 30, 6; Mt. 22, 37; Lc. 10, 27.

3 Lv. 19, 18; Mt. 19, 19; 22, 39; Lc. 10, 27; Rm. 13, 9; Gal. 5, 14; alt.

4 *De libero arbitrio* III, 21, 60. *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*, 61, 4.

5 *Vera Rel.* 46, 86-48, 93.

6 *Doc. Chr.* I, 22, 21-1, 26, 27.

7 *Doc. Chr.* I, 25, 26. English translation by Edmund Hill, O.P. (in *Teaching Christianity* I/11, ed. by John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (New York, 1996).

says that «the first thing I want to know is whether you love yourself,» and «after all, you can't love your neighbor as yourself, if you don't yet love yourself.»<sup>9</sup> Letting the audience pay attention to how we should love ourselves, Augustine quotes Ps. 10, 6 (11, 5) «whoever loves iniquity hates his own soul.»<sup>10</sup> He uses this Psalm's phrase in order to show «the criterion for true self-love.»<sup>11</sup> He does not think that any kind of self-love can be true. Using the notions in this psalm, Augustine explains the order of love.

If you love your neighbor, you don't love him unless you first love God. When you love God, after all, you don't love iniquity, and so you don't hate your own soul by loving iniquity. So if you don't love iniquity, you love equity, or justice, and that's where you love God. (...) the Lord wished to give the love you love yourself with a kind of mold in the love of God. And only then did he entrust your neighbor to you, to love as yourself.<sup>12</sup>

Augustine, as you see here, offers his understanding that self-love was given by God. The love given by God makes us possible to love ourselves. This love is expressed by the word «*miser cordia*» in the ending of the sermon. He says to the audience that «let us love the works of mercy (*opus misericordiae*),» «let us be fervent work of mercy.»<sup>13</sup> When we love ourselves, we love God, and when we love God, we love his mercy. In *Sermo* 90A, Augustine focuses on the intention of our love toward the superior being, which we have when we love ourselves. This intention is a kind of a reply to the love from God toward us.

The date of *Sermo* 90A is not univocal. It is «either to be dated around Augustine's ordination as bishop or should be situated at the beginning of the Pelagian controversy.»<sup>14</sup> E. Hill dates it 397 according to Lambot who dates it depending on its

8 Dolbeau 11, Mainz 40.

9 *Sermo* 90A, 7.

10 *Sermo* 90A, 7.

11 Anthony Dupont, «*Sermo* 90A (Dolbeau 11, Mainz 40): Self-Love as the Beginning of Love for Neighbour and God,» *Augustiniana* 57/1-2 (2007).

12 *Sermo* 90A, 12. Trans. by Edmund Hill, O.P. (in *Sermons* III/10 (341-400), ed. by John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (New York, 1995)).

13 *Sermo* 90A, 14.

14 Dupont (2007)

position in Possidius' *Index*.<sup>15</sup> P. –M. Hombert dates it 397-398.<sup>16</sup> A. Dupont carefully examines previous arguments about the date of this sermon, and considers the content itself of the sermon, with reference to A. Canning's study about love in Augustine, and suggests the date around 397. 397 is generally considered as the year when the first book of *doc. Chr.* was written. Pointing out that Hombert's argument is not sufficient to deny the date in Pelagian controversy, Dupont clarifies the consistency of Augustine's ideas about love in *doc. Chr.* and *Sermo* 90A. He also pays attention to that Augustine speaks the word «*miser cordia*» many times in the sermon.

The strongest argument to refrain from situating *Sermo* 90A in the context of the Pelagian controversy is the absence of the word *gratia* itself. (...) one must accept the fact that Augustine explicitly uses the word *gratia* in the Pelagian period but does not use it in *Sermo* 90A. There he speaks twelve times of *miser cordia* and uses this term precisely in contexts in which in his anti-Pelagian writings he will clearly use the word *gratia*.<sup>17</sup>

Dupont's suggestion is convincing. In fact, as we see above, the word «*miser cordia*» in *Sermo* 90A signifies the mercy from God toward us, not the love we have toward neighbors. So it can be expressed with the word *gratia*. Moreover, also in the argument of love in *doc. Chr.*, Ps. 10, 6 (11, 5) is quoted, and it is used in order to show the criterion for self-love. And, in *Sermo* 90A, Augustine mentions the story of the prodigal son. He focuses on that the son had returned to himself before he turned to his father. Augustine interprets that the returning to oneself is «self-love,» that makes one return to God. We should remember that the date when his *Confessiones* was written was almost the same as *doc. Chr.*, in that Augustine describes his conversion as an experience of the return of the prodigal son in *Confessiones*.<sup>18</sup>

I'd like you to see one more sermon which have common styles with the arguments in *Sermo* 90A and *doc. Chr.*. Augusti-

<sup>15</sup> *Sermons* III/10 (341-400), ed. by John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (New York, 1995), 85. n.1.

<sup>16</sup> Pierre-Marie Hombert, *Nouveles recherches de chronologie augustiniennne* (Paris, 2000), 399-416.

<sup>17</sup> Dupont (2007)

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Leo Charles Ferrari, «The Theme of the Prodigal Son in Augustine's Confessions,» *Recherches Augustiniennes* 12 (1977), 105-118.

ne voices also in *Sermo* 387 that we should love ourselves first, quoting the phrase «love your neighbor as yourself.»

*Whoever, after all, loves iniquity, hates his own soul* (Ps. 10, 6 (11, 5)). So if by loving iniquity you hate your own soul, is it any wonder that you hate the Word of god, who wishes your soul well? So shall we keep quiet, and reprove absolutely nobody at all? Let us administer reproof, surely, but first of all to ourselves. You wish to reprove your neighbor; there is nothing which is a nearer neighbor to you than yourself. Why go far away? You have yourself right there in front of you. What, after all, was it that the Lord said in the scripture? *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* So if you don't love yourself, how can you love your neighbor?<sup>19</sup>

Also in this sermon, Augustine quotes Ps. 10, 6 (11, 5) to discuss a criterion for self-love. That he expresses the God as the «Word of God» indicates that Augustine focuses on our intention toward the superior and exemplary being. The date of the sermon is uncertain unfortunately, but I think it is not out of point to suggest that *Sermo* 387 was done in earlier, pre-Pelagian, period.

## 2. SELF-LOVE AND MISERICORDIA

Then, let us see some arguments in his later works, namely the works in the period of Pelagian controversy. In these arguments, we find that Augustine quotes the phrase «love your neighbor as yourself,» and voices that we should love ourselves first. However, he does not quote Ps. 10, 6 (11, 5) in these arguments. And interestingly, the word *miser cordia* is often mentioned. The following arguments are of *Enchiridion* and *De civitate Dei*.

A person who wishes to give alms as they should be given must begin from himself and give them first to himself. Almsgiving is a work of mercy (*opus misericordiae*), and the saying is very true: *Have mercy on your soul and please God* (Sir. 30, 24). (...) They (the Pharisees) did not begin from themselves when giving alms or show mercy first to themselves. Because

<sup>19</sup> *Sermo* 387, 2 «corripiamus plane, sed prius nos. proximum vis corripere: nihil tibi est teipso propinquius. quid is longe? te habes ante te. quid enim Dominus ait per Scripturam? *diliges proximum tuum tamquam te ipsum.*» \*(Este sermón no es de San Agustín, sino que es de San Cesáreo de Arlés, aunque utilizando uno de San Agustín.)\*

of this order of love it is said: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, anyone who wants to do worthy works of mercy for his sins should first begin with himself. For it is unworthy for anyone not to do for himself what he does for his neighbor, especially when he hears God say, *You shall love your neighbor as yourself*, and again, *Have mercy on your soul, pleasing God* ((Sir. 30, 24). How can anyone who does not do this work of mercy for his own soul—that is, who does not please God—be said to do worthy works of mercy for his sins?<sup>21</sup>

In both arguments, Augustine quotes Sir. 30, 24, and relates the act of *miseror/ misericordia* to the act of self-love. Augustine interprets self-love, which is implied in the commandment of love in the Bible, is almsgiving to ourselves, and that almsgiving to ourselves is to have mercy to ourselves.<sup>22</sup> As we saw in the previous chapter, the phrase «*opus misericordiae*,» is used also in *Sermo* 90A.<sup>23</sup> But the meaning is different. Now the *miserordia/ opus misericordiae* does not signify the love from God to us, but the love we have toward people, especially toward ourselves. Augustine, who states that self-love is almsgiving and it should precedes the love for neighbor, uses the word in the meaning of the mercy given by ourselves toward ourselves. Augustine talks also as follows:

We are reborn in order to please God, who is rightly displeased with the sin we have contracted by our birth. These are

20 *Ench.* 20, 76 «qui enim vult ordinate dare eleemosynam a se ipso debet incipere et eam sibi primum dare. est enim eleemosyna opus misericordiae, verissimeque dictum est: miserere animae tuae placens Deo. (...) non dabant eleemosynas a se incipientes secumque prius misericordiam facientes. propter quem dilectionis ordinem dictum est: *diliges proximum tuum tamquam te ipsum.*» English translation by Bruce Harbert in *The Augustine Catechism: The Enchiridion on Faith Hope and Charity, Augustine of Hippo*, trans. and notes by Bruce Harbert, ed. and intro. by Boniface Ramsey (New York, 1999).

21 *Civ. Dei* XXI, 27, 2 «qui ergo dignas pro suis peccatis eleemosynas facit, prius eas facere incipiat a se ipso. Indignum est enim, ut in se non faciat, qui facit in proximum, cum audiat dicentem Deum: *Diliges proximum tuum tamquam te ipsum*; itemque audiat: *miserere animae tuae placens Deo*. hanc eleemosynam, id est, ut Deo placeat, non faciens animae suae quomodo dignas pro peccatis suis eleemosynas facere dicendus est?» English translation by William Babcock in *The City of God XI-XXII*, notes by Boniface Ramsey (New York, 2013).

22 See Louis Swift, «Giving and Forgiving: Augustine on *Eleemosyna* and *Misericordia*,» *Augustinian Studies* 32: 1 (2001), 25-36.

23 *Sermo* 90A, 14 «amemus itaque opera misericordiae.»

the first alms we gave ourselves, for by the mercy of the merciful God we searched for ourselves in our misery, acknowledging as just the judgement of his which brought us to misery, of which the apostle says, *The judgement following one trespass brought condemnation* (Rom. 5, 16), and giving thanks to his great charity, of which the same preacher of grace himself says, But God proves his love for us in that, while we still were sinners, Christ died for us (Rom. 5, 8). Thus we also, judging rightly of our misery, and loving God with the charity he has given us, lead holy and upright lives.<sup>24</sup>

In this argument, what Augustine says «the sin we have contracted by our birth (*quod nascendo contraximus*)» is our miserable state of being which all human beings have. It is, as it were, original sin. According this argument, when we acknowledge (*requisivimus*) our miserable state, we give alms to ourselves. The reason that Augustine uses the word «*requaero*» is that we are miserable but we forget or do not acknowledge that. Augustine asserts that to recognize original sin in ourselves is almsgiving to ourselves.<sup>25</sup> In fact, almsgiving is generally done toward the people whom we recognize as miserable. Following the above argument, the precedence of self-love to love for neighbor is argued. Augustine thinks that the recognition of original sin is love for ourselves which is implied in the commandment of love in the Bible.

Also here, let us take one more sermon in order to see the pattern of Augustine's discussion about self-love.

And what's charity? *Love the Lord God with your whole heart, and your whole soul, and your whole mind; love your*

<sup>24</sup> *Ench.* 20, 76 «propter hoc renascimur, ut Deo placeamus, cui merito displicet quod nascendo contraximus. Haec est prima eleemosyna quam nobis dedimus, quoniam nos ipsos miseros per miserantis Dei misericordiam requisivimus, iustum iudicium eius confitentes quo miseri effecti sumus, de quo dicit apostolus: Iudicium quidem ex uno in condemnationem, et magnae caritati eius gratias agentes, de qua idem ipse dicit gratiae praedicator: commendat autem suam caritatem Deus in nobis quoniam adhuc cum peccatores essemus Christus pro nobis mortuus est, ut et nos veraciter de nostra miseria iudicantes, et Deum caritate quam donavit ipse diligentes, pie recteque vivamus.»

<sup>25</sup> «Consistently in Augustine's discourse on almsgiving we encounter a decided emphasis on the disposition of the giver, in which humility is crucial. (...) Often Augustine juxtaposes the humble rich person with the proud pauper, probably reflecting his concern with the spiritual pride of the Pelagians.» (*Preaching Poverty in Late Antiquity*, Pauline Allen and Edward Morgan, Chapter 4-4 «Discourse on poverty and almsgiving,» (Leipzig, 2009), 132-133.)

*neighbor as yourself*; and then you have given alms first to your soul, in your conscience.<sup>26</sup>

This is *Sermo* 106. Unfortunately its date is uncertain. Also in this sermon, the Psalm is not cited, and the words *miseri-cordia*, *baptisma*, *peccatum* and *eleemosyna* are mentioned while connecting each other. E. Hill suggests that the date of *Sermo* 106 is after 415, on the grounds of the mention of baptism.<sup>27</sup> Hill's suggestion is agreeable, also from the view point of the usage of the word *eleemosyna* in Augustine's argument of self-love, which is consistent with the arguments in *civ. Dei* (the dates 413-427)<sup>28</sup> and *Ench.* (the date 421/422).

### 3. MISERICORDIA AS THE BASIS OF UNITY OF LOVE

Regarding the relationship of love for God and love for soul, Augustine already discusses in his *Soliloquia*. But, as well known, his attempt in *Soliloquia* did not seem to succeed.<sup>29</sup> O'Donovan pointed out that one of the reason of this failure was «there was no real basis of unity between God and the soul, no guarantee that love of God will not pull one way and demands of our friends the other way.»<sup>30</sup> O'Donovan says that Augustine was aware of that.

When we see Augustine's arguments about the commandment of love in the works which we saw in the first chapter, we surely find that the same struggle as in *Soliloquia* has continued. That is, the struggle to find «the real basis of unity» between God and soul/ourselves. As we saw above, regarding self-love, Augustine focuses on the intention of our love toward the superior being, in the arguments in the first book of *doc. Chr.*, *Sermo* 90A and *Sermo* 387. The image of rising upward is strong there. While arguing with the phrases in the Bible, the

26 *Sermo* 106, 4 «et quid est caritas? dilige Dominum Deum in toto corde tuo, et tota anima tua, et tota mente tua; dilige proximum tuum tamquam te ipsum; et fecisti misericordiam prius cum anima tua, in conscientia tua.»

27 E. Hill, O. P. (translation and notes), *Sermons* III/4 (94A-147A), ed. by John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (New York, 1992), 109. n.2.

28 Regarding the dates, I referred to *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Allan D. Fitzgerald (Cambridge, 1999).

29 Cf. Augustine, *Retractationes* I, 4, 1.

30 Oliver O'Donovan, *The problem of self-love in St. Augustine*, (New Haven and London, 1980), 23.

understanding of self-love as a reply to the love from God resembles the image of the soul's return in Platonism. In this image, neighbors are recognized as colleague who rise upward together to the same supreme-being, by the influence of another person's self-love. The image of the smoke from incense burners that rises up together, in *Conf. X*, and Augustine's expectation, which is spoken in *Conf. IX*, that the Manichaens would change their minds when they see Augustine's face who read the Psalms without being aware that they are looking at him, depicts the Augustine's understanding of the relationship between we and our neighbors. This understanding is reflected also in the discussion of *Sermo 387*, whose subject is how to correct (*corripio*) one's neighbor.

When one focuses on the love which is spoken in the image of rising up, the object of the love is the one which is wanted to be accord with. In this case, the love has a similar meaning with will or desire, and the rational state of our soul is always the focal point. On the other hand, love as *miser cordia* is not wanting to be accord with its object. The love is not a will or desire toward its object. When we do love as *miser cordia*, namely we do «*opus misericordia*,» the love is accord with the God's love in its direction. Particularly regarding self-love, when we love ourselves in the way of mercy, we do that in the same or similar way as God does/did for us. When we love ourselves in the way of mercy, we find the same thing as the one that God finds in ourselves. That is the original sin. The recognition of the original sin in ourselves is a kind of a joint point which connects God's love and our love. It is supposed that Augustine finds the «basis of unity» of God and us after his struggle since *Soliloquia*, when he focuses on the idea of self-love as *miser cordia*.

It is noteworthy that Augustine mentions the death of Christ in the above quotation.<sup>31</sup> The opinion, that the death of Christ becomes meaningless if we do not accept that we have the original sin, is typical in his works written against Pelagians.<sup>32</sup> Augustine thinks that if we have the total power to escape our weakness by ourselves, Christ is just a model for us as a man who has already escaped it. However, Christ died and revived.

31 *Ench.* 20, 76.

32 Cf. *De natura et gratia*, 2, 2; *Epistola* 177, 9; alt.

The death of Christ is love for us and the mercy to heal our sin as well. In other words, the death of Christ indicates that we have sin which is inevitable by ourselves. Therefore love for ourselves is to recognize and accept that we have the original sin. When we love ourselves who have inevitable weakness, the love accords with the love that Christ has toward us. Augustine's discussion of self-love as mercy toward ourselves is based on his understanding of the meaning of the death of Christ. It may be easy for us to say that the difference between the love as will or desire and the love as mercy is simply according with the subject of his each works. However, in fact, all of the works in the period of the Pelagian controversy, some of which we saw in the second chapter, are not written directly against the Pelagianism. It can be said that the difference of the argument of self-love between in Augustine's earlier works and his later ones comes from the development or deepening of his understanding of Christ.

#### CONCLUSION

When we think of self-love as mercy for ourselves, self-love and love for neighbor accord in the point that we and neighbor are the same as miserable beings who need mercy. Nobody can be in the upper states than the others. It is natural to think that Augustine's understanding of self-love has intimate relationship with his Ecclesiology. If the self-love is the recognition of the original sin in ourselves, the self-love is opposite to egoism which justifies ourselves. According to the tradition that emphasizes the love for God and neighbor, self-love, which is seen as egoistic, may have been sometimes denied. However, the self-love that Augustine focuses on is not an egoistic one but what enable us to accord with God and neighbor. The recognition of the original sin was ray of hope for Augustine.