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Women and the Imago Dei: Gender Ontology in St. Augustine's Thought

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Abstract

To rebuild gender relations in the church we need to unpack the source of the current complementarian beliefs, which take their origin in the teachings of the church fathers. In this interpretative paper, I will attempt to provide a new reading of St. Augustine's philosophy regarding women in light of The Trinity and City of God. It is my argument that Augustine has a twofold vision of the Imago Dei in humans. One based on the rational "inner man" —in which women do not participate— and another based on shared humanity. In this view women retain their own and independent part in the image of God and have their own unique and necessary role in earthly affairs. I further compare gender relation to Augustine's vision of relation between celibacy and married life, as one focuses towards the spiritual, the other towards temporal. Both are equally good in God's eyes, for both are based on calling and necessity. One is, however, the preferred option and appointed for leadership over the other.

Introduction

Throughout his theological and philosophical career, Augustine wrote in depth on nearly every major doctrinal issue of the time. Few would deny Augustine's deep insight and sharp mind. He contemplated his doctrines thoroughly and left few stones unturned. However, anyone who engages in gender theory will not find Augustine to be a fountain of information regarding the topic. Little notice was given to women in Augustine's work, and when it was it was hardly equitable. As we know, the Church Fathers were not particularly kind to their sisters in faith and Augustine is not an exception. Still, there is a lot of ambiguity in his texts. Perhaps there is a way to show more complexity to his thought than one would initially see.

On the basis of my beliefs, my philosophical obligations will not allow me to endorse Augustine's claims. Although he is one of the Church Fathers and a great theologian with magnificent philosophical legacy, he is not infallible or exempt from error. I believe his opinions on women, their role, and their part in the *Imago Dei* are the above

mentioned errors and should not be adopted by the church. However, we can clearly see throughout history that such opinions did influence gender relations. In order to repair what is broken and address the deeply rooted concerns of the opposite view from the feminist one, we need to know the exact meaning and metaphysics behind the texts that shape such beliefs. Therefore, in accordance with the principle of charity, it is important to understand more deeply the true intent behind Augustine's sometimes harsh words.

In my paper I will argue for a more generous reading of St. Augustine, based on Book XII of *The Trinity*¹ in connection with his account of the fall as presented in the *City of God*² in Book XIV, chapter 11.³ I will also push against Judith Stark's interpretation which claims that Augustine believed that women hold the image of God only by connection to their male counterpart.⁴ My aim will be to show that Augustine recognizes in women their own ontology of the *Imago Dei* without a necessary relationship with man and to establish the complementarian ontology of gendered image of God. Augustine endorses a twofold nature of the *Imago Dei*: one based on shared humanity and the other based on man's rightful inheritance of God's image implanted in him alone in the moment of creation, this second emphasis is understood better in terms of ordering of loves, each according to the hierarchy established by God in the beginning.

The Inner and Outer Man

To understand Augustine's view of the complex gender relation in regards to the Image of God, one must take into account what is the very center of the image of God in humans, and their nature. For an answer, we must turn to chapter 1 of Book XII of *The Trinity*, where Augustine explains his concept of the inner and the outer man and their shared existence.

The outer man is the earthly being and shares his⁵ experience with animals. He attributes to the *outer man* temporality, the senses, survival instincts, and even memory.

¹ Augustine. *The Trinity*. Translated by Edmund Hill. Edited by John E. Rotelle. 2nd ed. Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991.

² Augustine. *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*. Translated by Henry Bettenson. London: Penguin Books, 1984.

³ Given the scarce material regarding the topic and the close time frame for both of those works, I found it safe to assume that Augustine's vision of the *Imago Dei* in women did not vary greatly between the two books.

⁴ Stark, Judith Chelius. "Augustine on Women: In God's Image, but Less So." In *Feminist Interpretations of Augustine*, edited by Judith Chelius Stark, 215-41. University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007.

⁵ Given Augustine's less than egalitarian views, I will adopt gender-exclusive language for the sake of clarity.

Everything relating to the body and its daily struggles is encompassed within the *outer man*. This, Augustine asserts, is not the image of God: “[I]n the part that is drawn off for temporal activity one may... find...certainly not the image of God.”⁶ It is obvious for him that temporality is not something that reflects God’s image. He does, however, look at the body for hints of the difference between man and beast. The only bodily difference in his mind is the upright position⁷ of the human body.⁸ The human being lifts its head up to the heavens, the realm of unchanging truth.⁹ This is the manifestation of the *inner man*, or the mind. This is the very core of the human being’s inheritance of the *Imago Dei*. The difference between man and beast, setting aside his bipedal nature, is that the man fixes his gaze on the eternal, non-temporal, heavenly reality and makes moral judgements about his temporal activity.¹⁰

Thus, we encounter the relationship of the *inner man* with the outer one. To clarify what this means, Augustine compares it to the relationship between man and woman as depicted in Genesis 2.¹¹ He associates the mind with men and the body with women. The reason for that is the scriptural account of human origins and the creation narrative. The woman is derived from the man.¹² God uses a part of Adam’s body to create Eve, so Adam sees her as a part or an extension of himself. Similarly, Augustine sees the outer man as a part or extension of the *inner man*. The outer man is to be understood as a helper for the *inner man*, as Eve was supposed to be Adam’s helper. One comes out of another with a mission of support. Hence we can see that Augustine associates the female with the bodily, temporal reality, whereas it is the man’s responsibility to contemplate ultimate reality and truth.

This position is reflected in his account of the Fall, as summed up in Book XIV, chapter 11 of *City of God*.¹³ Augustine states in his interpretation that the serpent used all of his charm and cunning to deceive the woman, because he knew that she would be more naive and vulnerable to his deception. The man’s sin, on the other hand, was that he refused to abandon Eve alone in her sin, so he willingly and knowingly disobeyed God to be with her in their mutual downfall:

The rebel [angel]... by misusing [the serpent] as his instrument he had deceitful conversation with the woman - no doubt starting with the inferior of the human pair... supposing that the man would not be so easily gullible... Eve accepted

⁶ Augustine, *The Trinity*, 324.

⁷ Since Australia was discovered in the 1700’s, I believe that we can forgive Augustine his lack of knowledge regarding kangaroos. However, he probably should have known about chickens.

⁸ Augustine, *The Trinity*, 322.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 323.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 323.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 323.

¹² Genesis 2:18-24. As translated in Trinity, unless noted otherwise.

¹³ Augustine, *City of God*, 570.

the serpent's statement as the truth, while Adam refused to be separated from his only companion, even if it involved sharing her sin.¹⁴

The woman is portrayed as lacking in her judgement and her intelligence, whereas the man is full of knowledge and wisdom (even though still proud and sinful). We can see that Eve, created from Adam's body, has a role of helper to Adam. She is from Adam, but she is not identical to him, nor is she equal to him. She is the lesser part of him. What she lacks is the strong sense of the *inner man* that is reserved for the male alone. Since she is lacking in such important part, Satan finds no difficulty in convincing her to sin. Because she lacks the wisdom of the *inner man*, Augustine associates woman with the temporal activity and with earthly matters or practical wisdom.¹⁵ In *The Trinity*, he compares the relationship of mind with activity to that of man with woman. He notes that, as man is one flesh with the woman,¹⁶ reason and practical (or earthly) wisdom should be of one mind. That is not to equate wisdom with temporal matters, but to say that the temporal serves for the success of reason and the intellect. In a way, we can see a balance of forces: male and female, temporal and non-temporal, *inner man* and outer man. This balance is a necessity for Augustine, but that does not make the counterparts equal, this is shown in Augustine's hierarchical vision of the counterparts. Hence we can see that man alone is the image of God because of his nature, which consists of the *inner man*, who fixes his gaze on the non-temporal.

Shared Humanity

To end the conversation on that note would be misleading. In the following chapters of Book XII, we are provided with much more insight into the vision of the *Imago Dei*. In chapter 3 of the same book, Augustine asserts that "It [Genesis 1:27] says that what was made to the image of God is the human nature that is realized in each sex, and it does not exclude the female from the image of God..."¹⁷ Given what we have seen above, How can this make sense?

We can be sure that man is the image of God. But if the woman was made from man, then she inherits in some way the image of God by virtue of being the image of man, who is the image of God. As noted before, Augustine asserts that God is not found in the purely temporal. Adam is not a purely temporal being, though. He is a creature with a strong drive for God's ultimate truth. He carries the *inner man* within himself. It seems illogical to claim that woman retains none of the image. We can admit, in this view, that it might be a distorted image. Nevertheless, it cannot be disregarded completely. Thus man is the image of God fully in his humanity and in his masculinity

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Augustine, *The Trinity*, 323.

¹⁶ Genesis 2:24

¹⁷ Augustine, *The Trinity*, 329.

as the original creation, while woman is the image of God based on her humanity derived from the original one. In my interpretation, Augustine has to conclude that she is the image of God independent of the man, for she cannot rid herself of being human.

Women as the Image of God

This is at odds with Stark's interpretation of Augustine's writings. She says that "For her part, only when woman is joined to the man is she considered to be the image of God, just as only when the lower intellect is joined to the higher is it considered to be the image of God."¹⁸ In other words, women are not carry the *Imago Dei* themselves, but become co-bearers of the image of God with their male counterparts, who are alone made in the image of God. This view fails to account for a few crucial points that put the whole discussion in a new light. My first objection, apart from the one mentioned in previous paragraph, is taken from section 11 of chapter 3. Augustine gives hope to the widows, left alone without a husband or offspring.¹⁹ He advises the women to engage in good deeds and work for the benefit of the temporal world.²⁰ Surely then this is not an argument for a woman not being made in the image of God when she is separated from the man. Augustine thinks that woman's role is childbearing and earthly matters. Widows who have no children and virgins do not differ on this point in this view. They are both apart from men and can engage in good works individually. Their good works are a manifestation of their humanity, which is independent of their relationship to men, even though it is inherited from the man. Hence we can see that woman, even if she is a virgin her whole life and is never taken in marriage, remains an image bearer of God.

In the following passages of *The Trinity*, Augustine explains how women become complete in having the image of God within them. The key lies in the renewal of the mind through baptism in Christ, in whom there is no gender.²¹ He takes note of the human potential for responding to God: "[I]t is clear that females have this [mind's adherence to the eternal ideas to contemplate or consult them]: and it is clear that females have this as well as males. So in their minds a common nature is to be acknowledged; but in their bodies the distribution of the one mind is symbolized."²² Thus we can see that women have some kind of ability or allowance to be responsive to

¹⁸ Stark, Judith Chelius. *Augustine on Women: In God's Image, but Less So.*, 228.

¹⁹ Augustine, *The Trinity*, 330-31.

²⁰ The passage about good works is, I believe, a gateway to a truly feminist argument in Augustine. If skillfully presented, it shows women as active, engaged with the world, and fully present within it. While men are busy thinking about abstract realities, the women take the lead. I do not subscribe to this interpretation of Augustine, as I find it quite far-fetched. But if there is anything in his works that would present potential for a truly feminist argument, it is most likely this passage that can provide a window of opportunity for anyone that would embark on this breakneck endeavor.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 332.

²² *Ibid.*

God, which in Augustine's mind is precisely the *inner man* — the *Imago Dei*, although it is realized differently in woman's life than the man's. It is a distorted intellect, not a pure one as in the original counterpart. But since the woman is capable of recognizing the Lord, she must retain some form of the heavenly intellect, even if it is aimed only at development of pious behavior and godly character.

Gender Ontology Compared to Celibacy and Family Life

A certain analogy would make our understanding of this complex relation clearer. We thus return to Book XIV of *City of God*, where Augustine discusses sex and married life. He does not have a very positive view of sex. He emphasizes the shameful nature of intercourse, as shown by the need for privacy when people engage in carnal activity.²³ Hence human sexuality by its nature is impure, depraved, and is easily leads astray.²⁴ Augustine thinks that the need for sex is nothing more than a temptation and distraction from contemplating God and truth.

Yet, he recognizes marriage as instituted by God.²⁵ Sex as such is a necessity for populating the Earth. More so, if God ordered such a way of things, then it must also be good in itself. There seems to be a contradiction between Augustine's thoughts about sex and his thoughts about sex in terms of God's intent. However, truly good sex and marriage could have taken place only before the Fall and the depravity that came with it.²⁶ Now, if a man is to be joined in marriage²⁷ to a woman, he must proceed with caution. In such a case, he is forced to remain worried about the temporal things and earthly life. He needs to provide for his wife and children, since ignoring them would be sinful. A dilemma emerges: *inner man's* flourishing conflicts with necessity.

For the sake of the *inner man*, Augustine thinks that celibacy is the preferred alternative. This does not necessarily mean that married life is bad or necessarily even worse. It certainly is less preferable, but given our sexual needs and the necessity of procreation it is unachievable for some. Therefore marriage can be a good thing if and only if it is done properly and the love of God is the highest priority.

The dilemma between celibacy and marriage helps us with putting all that has been said so far in perspective. As we have established before, Augustine associates women with the earthly and temporal things. The man's main and most important role remains in the

²³ Augustine, *City of God*, 579.

²⁴ For Augustine, sexuality is sinful even within the confines of marriage. He recalls that it takes away sharpness of the mind as lust takes over the body. A man who enjoys married life ought to train himself in sexual intercourse as an act of reproduction, reason, and love, rather than lust after another's body.

²⁵ Augustine, *City of God*, 584.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 591.

²⁷ Obviously, intercourse outside of marriage is strictly forbidden in Augustine's view.

heavenly realm. If marriage is less preferable but not inherently worse than celibacy, bearing the image as a woman is not a bad thing, especially given that gender comes from necessity, not choice. It is certainly not what Augustine would consider the ideal situation for the individual, but there is no remedy for that. God makes people male or female and gives them certain roles to fill according to God's own wisdom and intent.

Gender Roles and Proper Ordering of Loves

The key to Augustine's ethics lies in Book XV of *City of God*: "These are thy gifts; they are good, for thou in thy goodness has made them. Nothing in them is from us, save for sin when, neglectful of order, we fix our love on the creature, instead of on thee, the Creator."²⁸ This short passage provides an insight that is infused into all of Augustine's major writings. It is a kind of lens to be used whenever one engages in interpretive reading of Augustine. Ontology of gender is no different in this regard and we ought to look at it through such lens. Properly ordered love is one that draws the moral agent's attention to God instead of to the creation. It must be placed in context of understanding one's own roles and loving God through them. Can a person love God while being unsatisfied with the role that was ordained and given by God? Meddling with God's order of things surely does not show love for God. We arrive at the realization that God's intent for women was to be man's helper and caretaker of earthly matters,²⁹ so that the man could keep his head lifted towards the heavens and focus on the flourishing of the *inner man* for the worship of God.

This is why Augustine recalls the apostle Paul: "The man ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God. But the woman is the glory of the man."³⁰ The verse is placed in context of temple practices and proper conduct. If the temple is a special place of worship, and if the image of the worshipped God is particularly manifest in the *inner man* — which the woman lacks — the woman ought to cover her head, which is concerned with temporal and earthly things.

In chapter 3 of *The Trinity*, Augustine repeats the words of Paul: "[Woman] led astray and falling into deviationism [Eve's sin in the Garden of Eden] will be saved through bearing children, if they remain in faith and love and sanctification with sobriety."³¹ The image of a woman being saved through childbearing sounds mysterious, mystical, and immensely significant. Childbearing is the most bodily thing a human being can engage in. To give forth life from one's own body is certainly a temporal endeavor. But how can it be salvific? Just as woman ought to love her child that she brings into the world in pain, so she should care for her good deeds and godly character. A godly

²⁸ Augustine, *City of God*, 637.

²⁹ Augustine, *The Trinity*, 323.

³⁰ 1Corinthians 11:7

³¹ 1Timothy 2:14

woman, who is aware of her role and the *Imago Dei* within her, needs to love God by bringing forth life: literally through giving birth and metaphorically through pious lifestyle and sacrificial love.

Bearing and begetting have particular importance in this context. Salvation offered on the basis of the image of God in people is offered to woman — who, in Augustine’s view, is in no position to rely on the *inner man* — through her submission to man as she bears what he begets. The man begets his offspring physically through the act of sexual intercourse. Metaphysically, he begets truth through his intellect. The woman’s role is in bearing children and bearing the truth begotten by the man in her good deeds. She lives out the truth, under man’s guidance, as discovered by or revealed by God to the *inner man*.

Conclusion

Several things can be asserted regarding Augustine’s idea of gender ontology. Firstly, we can see that the image of God is given to all people based on their participation in human nature. Secondly, man alone is the bearer of the *Imago Dei* in its full sense, as it pertains to his intellect or to the *inner man*. On the other hand, woman being made from the man carries a somewhat distorted, yet present, image of God. Since the image is somewhat distorted, her earthly nature takes a stronger hold of her and there is no such thing as the “inner woman.” This does not take away the *Imago Dei* given on the basis of her humanity. She even retains it if she is not placed within the confines of marriage, as she subjects her earthly intellect to God and carries out the mission of pious deeds and worship through engagement in service. Since Augustine was seemingly unaware of the ontological inequality he was creating between genders, it is most charitable to read his commentary on women accordingly. That is, to note that he does not claim for one gender to be superior over another in the eyes of God, they just maintain deontological differences in their roles as images of God. Augustine’s view of the differentiation of their roles are made clear as he asserts that males are called for leadership and intellectual work while the females are bound by their earthly nature.³² Augustine thusly concludes that she ought to submit herself to the more complete bearer of the *Imago Dei*. As long as we remain in the temporal world, the two are inseparable. Man cannot function without woman. The creation of Eve came to be because Adam was in need of a helper. In order to provide a contemporary usage of

³² It is important to take note that those claims are at fault for the oppression of women. The church fathers, including Augustine, shaped the theology which teaches that women are lesser than men. Such claims are harmful on their own, but when combined with foolish ignorance, lead to serious abuse, done in the name of submitting women to men’s will. Sadly, such was the reality of women in the religious, political, and often domestic setting. And still is...

Augustine's commentary, I turn to the Gospel of Matthew. Christ asserts: "One does not live by bread alone,"³³ but without the temporal bread, man does not live at all.

³³ Matthew 4:4 NRSV