CONTEMPLATIVE COMPASSION:
GREGORY THE GREAT’S DEVELOPMENT OF AUGUSTINE’S VIEWS
ON LOVE OF NEIGHBOR AND LIKENESS TO GOD

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Abstract

Gregory the Great depicts himself as a contemplative who, as bishop of Rome, was compelled to become an administrator and pastor. His theological response to this existential tension illuminates the vexed questions of his relationships to predecessors and of his legacy. Gregory develops Augustine’s thought in such a way as to satisfy John Cassian’s position that contemplative vision is grounded in the soul’s likeness to the unity of Father and Son. For Augustine, “mercy” lovingly lifts the neighbor toward life in God. Imitating God’s own love for humankind, this mercy likens the Christian to God’s essential goodness and, by this likeness, prepares him or her for the vision of God, which Augustine expects not now but only in the next life. For Augustine, the exercise of mercy can—when useful—involve a shared affection or understanding. Gregory makes this shared affection essential to the neighborly love that he calls “compassion.” In this affective fellowship, Gregory finds a human translation of the passionless unity of Father and Son—so that, for Gregory, compassion becomes the immediate basis for and consequence of seeing God—even in this life. Compassion does not degrade; rather, it retrenches the perfection of contemplation. Reconciling compassionate activity and contemplative vision, this creative renegotiation of Augustine and Cassian both answered Gregory’s own aspirations and gave to the tumultuous post-Imperial West a needed account of worldly affairs as spiritual affairs.

NOTE (8/2018, not in published edition): When in this paper I refer to the “direct” vision of God in this life, I mean not a vision of God’s essence, but an encounter with God that Gregory calls a “taste” or a “vision” that is ‘direct’ in not being anything mediated by or dependent upon the productive activity of the human mind.

1 Earlier versions of this paper were given at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University (2016) and at the meeting of the North American Patristics Society in Chicago (2017). For important suggestions during the process of this article’s evolution, I am indebted to John Cavadini, Fr. Brian Daley, Fr. Brian Dunkle, Thomas Clemmons, and John Sehorn. Whatever deficiencies may remain are, of course, my own.
Introduction

Pope Saint Gregory the Great (r. 590–604) is today recognized for his energies as a civil administrator, his political vigor, to his missionary initiative, and—of course—his spiritual instruction. Yet he, without whom “the form of medieval Christianity” has been called “almost inexplicable,” remains somewhat mysterious. First, scholars find it difficult to assess the unity and character of Gregory’s theological thought, expressed chiefly in homiletic and pastorally-oriented writings. Second, there is the murkiness of Gregory’s relationships to his predecessors. While his debts to Augustine of Hippo and John Cassian are everywhere affirmed, the natures of these dependencies remain elusive. Writing on Gregory’s exegesis, Robert Markus offers a clue as to how one might approach this problem: “When you scratch Gregory,” he writes, “the blood you draw always seems to be Augustinian. And yet somehow the absolute gap persists . . . .” Markus opines that this gap is defined by Gregory’s contemplative orientation: More freely allegorical than Augustine, Gregory makes the text, in Markus’s words, “a springboard” for “a flight from hearing to seeing.” This “flight” is a movement from text to reality, from discursive

4 From the vast body of relevant scholarship, I will cite works as necessary throughout this essay.
5 F. Homes Dudden, Gregory the Great: His Place in History and Thought (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1905), 1:v.
thought to intuitive apprehension, and—at the highest peak—from faith to the direct intellectual vision of God. Gregory, Markus owns, would sculpt the whole Church into a “vast community of contemplation.” For, as Thomas Humphries points out, Gregory “parallels Augustine” on the relationship between contemplation and action but, while Augustine often defers contemplative vision to eternal life with God, Gregory shares “Cassian’s certainty that the contemplative life” of seeing God “is a regular part of [earthly] Christian existence.” Unlike Augustine, Gregory pursues direct vision as an earthly goal; unlike Cassian, Gregory asserts that this goal is attainable universally, by every “station among the faithful” (fidelium officium).

I contend that this theological blending of Augustine and Cassian bears significantly on a third crux of Gregorian scholarship—the so-called “problem of the two Gregories.” His ecclesiastical correspondence shows him to have been a zealous Roman administrator; his theological works display a would-be monk who preferred contemplation over the busyness of the world. How to account for these seemingly-opposed inclinations? Bringing us back to the question of Gregory’s theology, George Demacopoulos argues that “[Gregory’s] particular theological commitments to asceticism and pastoral ministry informed his approach to administrative and diplomatic tasks.” Indeed, Gregory says as much himself, writing in his Book of Pastoral Rule:

[Christ] the Truth himself . . . , assuming our human nature [and] engaging in prayer on the mountain and working miracles in the towns [Lk. 6:12] [. . . ] gave a way of imitation to be followed by good rulers: Although in contemplation they strive already after highest things, yet by compassionating they ought to be entwined in the needs of the infirm. For indeed charity surges to great heights when

8 Markus, Gregory the Great and His World, 33 (n. 3).
9 Humphries, Ascetic Pneumatology, 185 (n. 7).
10 See Frederick Van Fleteren, “Augustine and the Possibility of the Vision of God in This Life,” Studies in Medieval Culture 11 (1977): 9–16. Gertrude Gillette writes that Augustine “wobbled on the question of whether it was possible to have a direct vision of God in this life, more inclined to the idea in his early life but then gradually abandoning it—at least as regards an intellectual vision of God—following St. Paul that ‘now we see dimly in a mirror but then face to face’ (1 Cor. 13:12).” However, he never totally abandoned the possibility of seeing God even in this life with the eyes of the heart . . . .” Such, however, was not the immediate goal of earthly life. See Gertrude Gillette, “Purity of Heart in St. Augustine,” in Purity of Heart in Early Ascetic and Monastic Literature: Essays in Honor of Juana Raasch, O.S.B., ed. Harriet Luckman and Linda Kulzer (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999), 176.
13 Demacopoulos, Gregory the Great, 9 (n. 12). Emphasis added.
it is compassionately drawn down to the lowly needs of neighbors. And the more it
descends to the infirm, the mightier is its reach to the highest things.\textsuperscript{14}

Holding thus that breadth in the practice of compassion redounds to greater height in
contemplation, Gregory declares succinctly in the \textit{Homilies on Ezekiel}: “he who, for his own sake,
flies to heavenly desire through contemplation still, however, sweats over temporal matters for the
advancement and advantage of his neighbors.”\textsuperscript{15} Such a claim is to us quite attractive—and yet it
runs counter to much precedent. Despite prominent biographical exceptions, the general \textit{theological}
bent of Late Antique reflection on the vision of God opposes the notion that deep
practical involvement in worldly life could directly upbuild rather than erode contemplative vision.
For the interior quiet and conformity to God’s life that are pre-requisite to this vision are disrupted
by the world’s conflict-fraught and fragmentary bustling.\textsuperscript{16} It is little wonder that Demacopoulos
has few companions in his suggestion that Gregory’s hope has a \textit{theological} basis. For Markus, in
fact, Gregory’s was a “resolution longed for rather than achieved.”\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14} Gregory I, \textit{Regula Pastoralis} (past.), 2.5. \textit{Regula Pastoralis; Regola Pastorale}, ed. Floribert Rommel, trans.
Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007), 60. Hinc ipsa Veritas per susceptionem nobis nostrae humanitatis ostensa, in monte
orationi inhaeret, miracula in urbibus exercet; imitationis uidelicet uiam bonis rectoribus sternens; ut et si iam summa
contemplando appetunt, necessitatibus tamen infirmantium commodo modo susceptur, quia tunc ad alta caritas
mirabiliter surgit, cum ad ima proximorum se misericorditer attrahit; et quo beneigne descendit ad infima, ualentur
recurrir ad summa. See also Gregory I, \textit{moral.}, 7.15.18. \textit{Moralia in Iob; Commento Morale a Giobbe 1 (I–VIII)}, ed.
Paolo Siniscalco, trans. Emilio Gandolfo, Opere di Gregorio Magno 1 (Rome: Città Nuova, 1992) [hereafter OGM
1/1], 556–558. Trans.: Gregory I, \textit{Moralia in Job: Morals on the Book of Job}, trans. James Bliss, 3 vols. (South Bend,
Ind.: Ex Fontibus, 2012), 1:344.

\textsuperscript{15} Gregory I, \textit{Homiliae in Hezechihelem} (in Ezech.), 2.1.7 (OGM 3/2:30; Tomkinson, \textit{Homilies}, 266–267) (n. 11). Et
qui propter se ad caeleste desiderium iam per contemplatione euolat, adhuc tamen pro proiectu et utile proximorum
in rebus temporalibus desudat.

\textsuperscript{16} The question here is not about the possibility of sanctity in the world but of its consummation in perfect love and
contemplative vision. Late antiquity abounds with holy men and women that set their wider communities in order. We
find them in Athanasius’s \textit{Life of Anthony}, Sulpicius’s \textit{Life of Saint Martin}, Gregory’s Benedict in the \textit{Dialogues}, and
the example of many a Byzantine bishop. However, one observes in these cases a tension both existential and
theological, and while the \textit{practice} of such holy men and women would indicate that contemplative vision can be a
regular feature of a life in the world, there is—especially in the pre-Gregorian West—a decided lack of theological
development concerning \textit{how} this might be so. Neither Augustine nor Cassian offers such an account, and the monastic
tradition that Cassian carries westward suggests that life in the world is in fact opposed to that perfection which is
requisite to the vision of God. Nor does the situation seem to have improved in the fifth and sixth centuries. Among
the monk-bishops of Gaul, we find “contemplation” made accessible to every bishop, but only when defined
exclusively as meditation upon Scripture (e.g. Julianus Pomerius). Or, we find a life of perfect love (requisite to vision)
declared as attainable by the laity, but only to the extent that they are able to live what amounts to a monastic schedule
of prayer and vigils added atop the daily distractions of farming and family life (e.g. Caesarius of Arles). Where
contemplation meant aristocratic meditative study, it was impractical for the unleisured. Where contemplation meant
the vision of God in the perfection of prayer, no theological anthropology on offer seemed able to escape the
Cassianese imperative of the monastic enclosure or (better) the solitary retreat. There was, in short, no account of how,
part from monastic-style practice, a life of charity in the world could build toward and sustain the \textit{interior} peak of
love that was considered to be the immediate basis for seeing God.

\textsuperscript{17} Markus, \textit{Gregory the Great and His World}, 19 (n. 3). “It was a resolution longed for rather than achieved; or, perhaps,
Thus, while Markus gives an entrée to the question of Gregory’s predecessors by raising the question of contemplative vision; and if Gregory himself makes contemplation flow from and lead to compassion; it is Carole Straw who points us again toward Augustine. Straw writes that it was Gregory who first “‘invented’ compassion, marking a watershed in Christian tradition” by using the verb compatior with uncommon frequency, and doing so with “the modern meaning of sympathetic understanding or empathy with other people.” Yet, she continues, in doing so Gregory has drawn upon “Augustine [who] writes frequently of [the] misericordia dei . . . . [as a] mercifulness that is close to compassion because it involves shared feelings.”

Can we find in this connection to Augustine a resolution of the Gregorian tension?

Building on the work of these and other scholars, I propose three points: First, Augustine of Hippo described Christian life in terms especially of mercy, which loves the neighbor in order to lift the neighbor toward a life in God. This mercy, by imitating God’s own love for humankind, likens the Christian to God’s essential goodness and so by likeness prepares for the vision of him, which Augustine expects not now but usually only in the next life. Second, for Augustine, this mercy can—when useful—involves a shared affection or understanding in which the Christian might more effectively through friendship lift the neighbor toward God. Third, Gregory transforms Augustine’s teaching on mercy into compassion by making this shared affection essential to the neighborly love that, now seen as translating the embrace of Father and Son, can be the direct and immediate basis for the vision of God enjoyed in this life. Gregory’s development of Augustinian thought thus makes contemplative vision a concomitant element of compassionate activity in the torn world of the post-Imperial West.

1. Augustine on Mercy’s Likeness to Divine Bonitas

Augustine writes:

[T]he Lord himself declared, “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” [Matt. 5:8]. . . . [Therefore,] let us hold [earthly beauties] cheap and choose him for our love, and by this love so cleanse our hearts through faith that the vision of God may find our hearts already purified.

Such advice is common to the broad tradition of Late Antique Christianity. Purity of love was seen as having a particular likeness to God’s own love, a likeness pre-requisite to the sight of him. And yet the question of how this love resembles God determines how one goes about practicing purity of heart. John Cassian, following Christ’s prayer in John 17, draws his description of pure love from the union of Father and Son in the simple divine nature. In the tenth conference, Abba Isaac explains that only a ceaseless human love and single thought of God can imitate the divine

achieved on the personal level of a life experienced and accepted, rather than on the level of a conceptually defined and clarified relationship of the two forms of life.”


love that flows to humans from the divine unity. Cassian has just recounted to Isaac how it was recently explained to the anthropomorphite Abba Sarapion that the divine majesty is “immeasurable and incomprehensible and invisible” because his “nature is incorporeal and uncomposed and simple” and could not “be apprehended by the eyes or seized by the mind.”

After adding his own affirmation of God’s simplicity, Abba Isaac emphasizes that only those properly instructed concerning the divine nature can “attain to that purest form of prayer” free of any illusion of corporeal multiplicity. To define this prayer, Isaac describes how God’s own “pure and indissoluble love” for the Christian soul comes forth from the simple “unity which the Father has now with the Son and which the Son has with the Father.” Christ himself prayed to the Father “that they all may be one as we are one” (John 17:22) and so, in contemplative vision, the undivided love flowing from their simple unity is “carried over into our understanding and our mind.” To reach this vision, Isaac teaches, the soul must be perfected in a like love: “all the yearnings of one’s heart” must “become a single and continuous prayer” so that “whatever we . . . understand . . . may be God.”

The simple unity of pure love is supported practically by Cassian’s ideal of solitary life in the undisturbed desert. To be sure, he does not exclude assistance toward one’s neighbor. In the first place, as Abba John cautions, excellence in the love of neighbor must be practiced both inwardly and outwardly before one departs the monastery for solitary life. Nor may even the hermit refuse the call of the neighbor in need. However, Abba Theonas stipulates, for those who have advanced to this solitary life, neighborly action is a contingent necessity imposed by the fall, commanded by the loving Lord, and requisite to the fullness of love. Ongoing involvement with the neighbor is not intrinsic to perfect love, and its exercise can impede or degrade the progress of contemplation. We can appreciate, then, why Abba Isaac interprets Christ’s activities rather

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differently than will Gregory: Jesus entered the villages because “he himself did not need the support of withdrawal,” but he prayed alone on the mountain to teach “by example” that “if we too wish to address God with purity and integrity of heart,” we must “likewise draw apart from . . . the crowd” and, spiritually and physically, go to “the lofty mountain of solitude.”

Augustine chooses a different metaphysical starting point and reaches different practical prescriptions: To define the pure heart’s likeness to God, he looks to the object of the heart’s love—God’s essential goodness, his bonitas. For, as Augustine writes, “each one is such as is his love.”

By the only-Begotten himself, he calls us to his own Likeness. . . . [All this] takes place by the great goodness of God, which [goodness] we are commanded to imitate, if we wish to be children of God.

Embracing and imitating God’s bonitas, one is likened to that goodness; being thus likened, one is ready to see him.

27 John Cassian, Coll., 10.6.4 (CSEL 13:292, trans. Ramsey, Conferences, ACW, 57:375). Quod uolens noster dominus confirmare ac perfectae nobis reliquere puritatis exempla, et quidem cum ipse fons inviolabilis sanctitatis ad obtinendum eam secessionis adiutorio ac solituidinis beneficio extrinsecus non egeret (non enim poterat ullis turbaram sordibus puritatis plentitudo maculari nec contaminari humano consortio qui uniuersa polluta emundat atque sanctificat), secessit tamen in monte solus orare, per hoc scilicet nos instruens suae secessionis exemplo, ut si interpellare nos quoque uoluerimus deum puro et integro cordis affectu, ab omni inquietudine et confusione turbaram similiter secedamus, ut in hoc corpore conmrorantes ad similitudinem quandam illius beatitudinis, quae in futuro repromittitur sanctis, uel ex parte aliqua nos aptare possimus, sitque nobis omnia in omnibus deus.

28 Augustine, like Cassian, describes purity or cleanliness of heart in terms of “simplicity,” intending a singleness of love and intention, by way of ordering all loves with reference to God, thus with a meaning other than Cassian’s. On Augustine, see Gillette, “Purity of Heart in St. Augustine” (n. 10).

29 Augustine, ep. Io. tr., 2.14 (SC 75:180, trans. NPNF1, 7:475). “Hold fast rather the love of God, that as God is eternal, so you also may remain in the eternal: because such is each one as is his love. Love the earth; you shall be earth. Love God, what shall I say? You shall be god? I dare not say it of myself. Let us hear the Scriptures: I have said, You are gods, and all of you sons of the Most High [Ps. 82:6]. If then you would be gods and sons of the Most High, Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world [1 John 2:15].”


31 The soul turned toward God in love becomes good as God is good, as in Augustine, trin., 8.3.5 (CCSL 50:274, trans. Hill, WSA, The Trinity, I/5, 245). “[T]he Good to which the [intellectual] soul turns in order to be good is that Good from which it gets its being [intellectual] soul at all. This is when the will accords with nature to perfect the soul in good, when the will turns in love toward that Good by which the soul is . . . .” Ad hoc se igitur animus convertit ut bonus sit a quo habet ut animus sit. Tunc ergo voluntas naturae congruit ut perficiatur in bono animus cum illud bonum diligitur conversione uoluntatis unde est . . . . Henry Chadwick writes: “[Augustine’s] repeated point is that the object of our love, whether high or low, is the magnet irresistibly drawing us on. We become what we love;” thus Henry Chadwick, Augustine: A Life, Reprint edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 96. See also John Bussanich, “Goodness,” AttA, 390–391.
What, however, is the path into conformity with God’s goodness? To discover the Christian life of bonitas, Augustine—like Cassian—looks to God’s life. However, he draws not on a direct analysis of God’s immanent love but from God’s economic manifestation of love in the human life of Christ incarnate. Augustine turns to Christ’s human life because that is where God has seen fit to teach us. The sin-darkened heart (John 1:5) cannot grasp the Word directly (John 1:1–4), therefore, Augustine tells us, God “prepared” the Word “to be seen by the eyes of flesh as well.”32 By becoming incarnate, God the Word translated his divine life into a human life, somewhat “as when we talk,” “our thought . . . takes on the form of spoken utterance.”34 Christ’s “example of how to live” translated the divine life “in no other mode than the human one.”35 By conforming themselves to this translation, Christians advance on a “way . . . traveled by the affections,”36 a voyage unto likeness by which their minds are “purified to enable them to perceive [God’s] light and to cling to it once perceived.”37

32 Augustine, s. 261, 6 (SPM1:92, trans. Hill, WSA, Sermons 230–272, III/7, 213). For the impure of heart “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it [John 1:5]”—and “[w]hat is the darkness but evil works? What is the darkness, but evil longings, pride, avarice, ambition, envy?” Ecce quare non capis : Lux in tenebris lucet, et tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt. Quae sunt tenebrae, nisi opera mala? Quae sunt tenebrae, nisi cupiditates malae, superbia, avaritia, ambitio, inuiidentia?


34 Augustine, doctr. chr., 1.13.12 (CCSL 32:13, trans. Hill, WSA, Teaching Christianity, 2nd ed., I/11, 111). Sicuti cum loquimur, ut id, quod animo gerimus, in audientis animum per aures carneas inlabatur, fit somus uerbum quod corde gestamus, et locutio uocatur, nec tamen in eundum somum cogitatio nostra convertitur, sed apud se manens integra, formam uocis qua se insinuet auribus, sine aliqua labe suae mutationis adsumit: ita uerbum dei non commutatum caro tamen factum est, ut habitaret in nobis. He writes similarly in Io. eu. tr., 17.1 (CCSL 36:170, trans. NPNF1, 7:111). “[A]s the soul did not know him by whom it was to be healed, and had eyes in the flesh by which to see corporeal deeds, but had not yet sound eyes in the heart with which to recognize him as God concealed in the flesh, he wrought [corporeally] what the soul was able to see, in order to heal that by which it was not able to see;” quia ipsa anima non eum nouerat a quo sananda erat, et oculos habebat in carne unde facta corporalia uideret, nondum habebat sanos in corde, unde Deum latentem cognosceret; fecit quod uidere poterat, ut sanaretur unde uidere non poterat.

35 Augustine, doctr. chr., 1.11.11 (CCSL 32:12, trans. Hill, WSA, Teaching Christianity, 2nd ed., I/11, 110). Quod non possemus, nisi ipsa sapientia tantae etiam nostrae infirmitati congruere dignaretur et uiuendi nobis praebet exemplum non aliter quam in homine, quioniam et nos homines sumus.


Christ’s commands tell us how to imitate God’s *bonitas*; therefore, the purifying way of the affections is especially the love of God and neighbor. His example shows that this love takes the form of “mercy” (*misericordia*). Referencing the good Samaritan, Augustine explains:

If anyone is rightly to be called “neighbor,” either to whom the duty of mercy [*officium misericordiae*] is to be extended, or by whom it is to be extended to us, it clearly follows that . . . our Lord and God himself willed to be called our neighbor; for the Lord Jesus Christ indicates himself as the one who came to the help of that man lying half dead on the road, beaten and left there by robbers.

Christ’s human mercy echoes his *divine* love for humankind, issuing from his essential character. Thus Augustine writes, “[God] renders mercy to us [*praebet misericordiam*] on account of his goodness [*propter suam bonitatem*].” God needs no good from humanity; he loves humankind “to our benefit and not his,” “that we should enjoy him” forever. *Misericordia* is therefore the outward expression of that love by which God wills to gather even *fallen* humanity into “the eternal perfection of all joys,” a union in God’s life in a common “direct contemplation of God the

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38 Augustine, *ench.*, 32.121 (CCSL 46:113–114, trans. Hill, WSA, “Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Charity,” I/8, 342). “The end of the commandment is charity, and God is love (1 John 4:8). So whatever God commands, such as, You shall not commit adultery (Exod. 20:14; Deut. 5:18), and whatever is not commanded but advised for spiritual reasons, for instance, It is well for a man not to touch a woman (1 Cor. 7:1), is rightly observed only when it is done out of love of God and of one’s neighbor because of God.” Ille enim nobis praebet misericordiam propter suam bonitatem, nos autem nobis inuicem nosstri miseretur, ut se perfruamur, nos uero inuicem nostri miseremur, ut illo perfruamur.


41 Augustine, *doctr. chr.*, 1.30.33 (CCSL 32:25, trans. Hill, WSA, *Teaching Christianity*, 2nd ed., I/11, 120–121). The full passage reads: “[God] renders mercy to us on account of his goodness, but we [render mercy] to one another on account of his [goodness, not ours]. He has pity on us so that we may enjoy him, while we have pity on each other again so that we may all enjoy him.” Ille enim nobis praebet misericordiam propter suam bonitatem, nos autem nobis inuicem propter illius: id est, ille nostri miseretur, ut se perfruamur, nos uero inuicem nostri miseremur, ut illo perfruamur.

Father.”

John Cavadini writes, is “part of [the] eternal essence” that will be seen in beatitude, wherein God “is the content of that vision.”

God’s ingathering love originates in the divine *bonitas* and flows outward into human history as mercy in that it communicates goodness to others; and by this communication it draws human beings back into the inner life of love that they have forsaken. The love of the pure heart, then, desires and loves God for his very *bonitas*, but simultaneously it loves the neighbor—even the enemy—so as to desire and love that neighbor’s share in the inexhaustible good of God. By such a love of God and neighbor, the love that goes forth from God’s *bonitas* is returned in echo, as it were, to him.

Quite different than Cassian, then, Augustine’s practice of a purifying and God-like love does not tend toward withdrawal from the world, much less idealize self-alienation from all human community. As the good God has mercy that humanity may enjoy him, so, Augustine writes, “we have mercy on each other again so that we may all enjoy him.” This mercy is lived best within a community of faith and love, even amidst worldly society. Such is Augustine’s path to the vision of God.

2. Augustine on Mercy as Sometimes Compassionate

For Augustine the practice of mercy is through friendship, forgiveness, almsgiving, preaching, and prayer—the general concourse of human relations in godly love. The earthly Christian life strives not for a simple love focused exclusively upon the thought of God but for a focusing of loves by referring them all to God. Further distancing himself from Cassian’s radically untroubled love, Augustine introduces a note of empathy, even unto co-suffering. For *misericordia* means “wretched-heartedness.” Thus Augustine can say that, when Christ by his incarnation “came

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43 Augustine, *trin.*, 1.8.16–1.8.17 (CCSL 50:50, trans. Hill, WSA, *The Trinity*, I/5, 76). Haece enim nobis contemplatorio promittitur actionum omnium finis atque aeterna perfectio gaudiorum. . . . De hac contemplatione intellego dictum: *Cum tradiderit regnum deo et patri* [1 Cor. 15:24], id est cum perdueritis justos quibus nunc ex fide uiuentibus [cf. Rom. 1:17] regnat mediator dei et hominum homo Christus Iesus [1 Tim. 2:5] ad contemplationem dei et patris. In his *Enarrationes*, Augustine writes of mercy as God’s granting of good to those who do not deserve it: “[I]n showing us mercy God convinces us that whatever good we humans have, we have only from him who is our total good. When we see that whatever good we have, we hold not from ourselves but from our God, we also see that whatever is praiseworthy in us comes from God’s mercy, not from our own merits;” thus *en. Ps.*, 84.9 (CCSL 39:1167, trans. Boulding, WSA, *Expositions of the Psalms*, III/18, 210). Ostendo enim illi misericordiam suam, persuadet illi quia quidquid boni habet ipse homo, non habet nisi ab illo qui omne bonum nostrum est. Et cum uiderit homo quidquid boni habet non se habere a se, sed a Deo suo; uidet quia totum quod in illo laudatur, de misericordia Dei est, non de meritis ipsi.


46 Augustine, *doctr. chr.*, 1.4.4-1.5.5 (CCSL 32: 8-9), 1.22. 21 (CSEL 32: 17-18), and 1.26. 27-1. 27. 28 (CSEL 32: 21-22).
to the help of that man lying half dead on the road, beaten and left there by robbers,” he “took pity on us” (miseretur nostrī). Here are the seeds of Gregory’s teaching on compassion.

What does Augustine’s merciful pity look like? Carole Straw observes that, whereas the Stoic tradition shunned any share in one’s neighbor’s suffering as a threat to the interior unity of one’s heart, Augustine saw it as a useful act of self-extension in love. Around the year 400, analyzing the word misericordia in his Confessiones (conf.), Augustine writes: “Now, if one suffer in one’s own person, it is the custom to call this miseria. But when one suffers with another, then it is called misericordia.” Yet over a decade earlier, in 388, in his De moribus ecclesiae Catholicae (mor.), he excluded misery from the essence of misericordia. There, he writes that God is “wretched-hearted” or “merciful” (misericors) toward his creatures in that he wills their good, unto a full-hearted involvement in their lives—but he suffers no painful feeling in result. God is divinely misericors without misery, compassionate without passion. Human beings, then, can be called misericors when they “dutifully and humanely supply all things required for warding off” the “evils and distresses” of others. The motive is the key: True, Augustine admits, the usual sense of misericordia refers to what “makes wretched [miserum] the heart of one co-suffering [condolescentis] another’s ill.” However, the “wise” are misericors in acts of charity that, undertaken to alleviate others’ sufferings, are “drawn forth by the duty of goodness.” They need feel no pain to be motivated and may even act “free of misericordia.” That precisely wherein all such acts can be considered merciful is not in co-suffering but in willing the neighbor’s good. Any co-suffering is consequent upon rather than essential to one’s merciful involvement in the neighbor’s life.

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48 In addition to Straw’s “Gregory and Tradition” (n. 18) see the helpful discussion of Augustine’s development on this and related matters in Susan Wessel, Passion and Compassion in Early Christianity (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 98–129. As Sarah Byers puts it, Augustine’s mature understanding of misericordia “is not merely a disposition to do helpful things for others, but also to be sensibly affected by their suffering,” a disposition that is not “mere sentimentality” because in light of God “the emotion of compassion is caused by an accurate judgment about the loss of real goods” maintaining “a distinction in magnitude between temporal goods and eternal goods;” thus Sarah Byers, “The Psychology of Compassion: Stoicism in City of God 9.5,” in Augustine’s City of God: A Critical Guide, ed. James Wetzel (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 148.

49 Straw, “Gregory and Tradition,” 132 (n. 18). Augustine reproaches the Stoics with a “stiffness of inhumanity” (rigore inhumanitatis) for fleeing suffering. Augustine, mor., 1.27.54 (CSEL 90:57, trans. NPNF1, 4:56).


51 Augustine, mor., 1.27.53 (CSEL 90:56, NPNF1 4:56). Quare illa omnia, quibus huiuscemodi malis incommodisue resistitur, qui officiose atque humiliter praebent, misericordes uocantur, etiamsi sapientes usque adeo sint, ut iam nullo animi dolore turbentur; nam quis ignoret ex eo appellatam esse misericordiam, quod miserum cor faciat condolescentis alieno malo? Et quis non concedat ab omni miseria liberum esse debere sapientem, cum subuenit inopi, cum esurienti cibum praestat potumque sitienti, cum aestit nudum, cum peregrinum tecto recipit, cum oppressum liberat, cum denique humanitatem suam usque ad sepulturam portigit mortuorum? Etiamsi id faciat mente tranquilla, nullis auleis doloris instinctus, sed adductus officio bonitatis, misericors tamen uocundus est. Huic enim nihil obest nomen, cum absit miseria.
However, in the year 406 a few years after the *conf.* and nearly two decades after the *mor.*, Augustine goes farther, to write that the *misericors* ought to welcome *miseria* in their love of neighbor. *Misericordia* works to alleviate the neighbor’s burdens by bearing them (*alterius onera portare* cf. Gal. 6:2). By bearing one another’s burdens, Christians form a community of mercy (cf. Eph. 4:2). The love that participates in the neighbor’s burden is the love by which one begins to see God. This participation is carried even further in Augustine’s roughly contemporaneous (405) *Epistle* 82 to Jerome. Freely intermixing *compatior* with various forms of *misericors* and *misericordia*, Augustine writes that pure-hearted mercy bears the neighbor’s burdens not only by exterior participation in the neighbor’s lot but also *interiorly* by bearing them precisely *as one’s own*. By compassionating, one loves one’s neighbor as oneself.

To “compassionate” (*compatior, compati*), then, is to enter “mercifully” (*misericorditer*) into an affective and cognitive fellowship with one’s neighbor. Augustine speaks of the “feeling of the one co-suffering” (*compatientis affectum*) that “administers the care of wretched-hearted healing for all the ills of all others, as if they were one’s own.” Now, to compassionate is not to feel pain at another’s suffering. Nor is it simply to mirror the *feelings* of another. Rather, one feels pain or gladness because one has “stepped into the shoes” of the other and, from that stance, reacts to the objects of the other’s experience, *from the other’s perspective*. Compassionate mercy shares in another’s affective experience because it shares in another’s cognition of the world. “Compassion,” writes Carole Straw, “implies shared understanding, sympathy with another’s point of view.” Thus does it bear another’s burdens as one’s own.

Still, this co-suffering fellowship in another’s ills is always with a view to *alleviating* them. The other’s experience of those objects, therefore, must not define the interior horizon in which one compassionately evaluates them. For instance, Paul the Apostle became “a Jew among the Jews” (1 Cor. 9:20) in order to free them for Christ. He practiced Jewish sacraments to express to them his understanding of their desire “to be cleansed from their sins and to be saved.” Paul sees beyond, to the final source of salvation in Christ but, by this intimate understanding, Paul (and the Christian that imitates him) is able to “help the other as he would have wanted the other to help

52 Augustine, *Io. eu. tr.*, 17.8–9 (CCSL 36:174–175). Augustine writes that love, drawing near to God by bearing the neighbor’s hurts, fulfills the command: “take up your bed and walk” (John 5:8).


54 Literally, the “feeling of the [one who is] compassionating.”


56 Contemporary parlance sometimes identifies this as “empathy” in contradistinction to “sympathy.” However, as “sympathy” has a broader connotation in academic discourse, I do not wish to rely on contemporary terms. Cf. n. 57 infra.

57 Straw, “Gregory and Tradition,” 131 (n. 18). More fully, she writes that, when Augustine joins *compatior* to *misericordia*, he “frees [compassion] from its Stoic context as a description of cosmic, medical, or literal harmony. Compassion is shared feeling, not just of suffering; compassion implies shared understanding, sympathy with another’s point of view.” Straw cites, as I do, Augustine’s *Ep.* 82. Here, “sympathy with another’s point of view” is not to be confused with the “sympathy” as popular discourse distinguishes it from “empathy.”

58 Augustine maintains, as in *mor.*, his emphasis on the interior intention.

him.” And so, like the Samaritan, one imitates the Incarnation, by which God mercifully and compassionately came to us in a manner suited to us, to show us something beyond us. Thus is compassion rooted in the imitation of God’s *ad extra* love, the *misericordia* flowing from his *bonitas*, by which he bore our burdens to gather us into his life. Christian charity likens the Christian to the life of God, but the merciful compassion through which that charity is exercised is not so clearly rooted. Augustine leaves implicitly unresolved the question of whether a life of compassion is compatible with the earthly reception of the contemplative vision of God.

3. Gregory the Augustinian—Compassion’s Likeness to the Trinitarian Life

Augustine made *compati* an act in aid of a more general *misericordia*. Gregory, as Carole Straw points out, “elevates compassion to a principle or general rule, as the form [that] love takes among human beings.” Susan Wessel notes that Gregory went beyond his predecessors to make compassionate charity a “bonding agent that joined the transcendent to the worldly in the person of the bishop.” As we saw at the beginning of this paper, the bishop’s compassion is the downward counterpart to his upward contemplation. Now we can confront Gregory’s relationship to Augustine in order to understand his universal contemplative aspirations. That is, by considering how Gregory’s *compassio* develops Augustine’s *misericordia*, we will be able to posit the theological why and how of his confidence in the possibility of contemplative vision for those in worldly life.

To begin with, recall that Augustine and Cassian alike seek love’s purity in its likeness to God’s own love. Gregory derives his characterization of godlike love not simply from the fact of the Incarnation but especially from the love that Christ showed in his crucifixion:

He who is good [*bonus*] not from some accidental gift but essentially says: “I am the good shepherd.” He adds the form of his same goodness, which we are to imitate, saying: “the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep” [John 10:11]. He did what he taught; he showed what he commanded.

God’s essential goodness is shown in his crucifixion not only by its function in drawing us into God’s life but also specifically—and here Gregory departs from Augustine—*specifically* in the knowledge that Christ gains by his cruciform participation in universal human suffering:

60 Augustine, *Ep.*, 82.29 (CCSL 31A:117, trans. Teske, WSA, *Letters*, II/1, 331). Vide si non dixit: fiere tamquam ille, ut illum lucrifacias! Non utique ut ipsum delictum fallaciter aget, aut se id habere simularet, sed ut in alterius delicto quid etiam sibi accidere posset attenderet, atque ita alteri tamquam sibi ab altero ullelet misericorditer subueniret, hoc est non mentientis astu sed compatiendo quia esse potuisset, tamquam qui se hominem cogitaret, omnibus omnia factus est, ut omnes lucrifaceret.

61 Straw, “Gregory and Tradition,” 139 (n. 18).

62 Wessel, *Passion and Compassion*, 166 (n. 48).

63 See quotation at n. 14.

He would have loved us too little, except he took upon himself our wounds as well; . . . For he found us subject to suffering, and mortal beings, . . . [and] to show how great the virtue of compassion is, he deigned to become in our behalf what he would not have us be, that in his own Person, temporally, he should take upon himself death, that he might banish death from us forevermore. . . . [Such] good will surpasses [that] of one giving [aid only by outward action].65

By Christ’s love upon the Cross, we learn compassion to be the very essence of God-like love:

True compassion is to join, out of generosity, in the suffering of one’s neighbor . . . . [Christ] decided to aid [us] . . . by dying, because . . . . he would not have exhibited to us the force of his love unless he himself underwent . . . that which he was to take away from us.66

To be clear: Gregory nowhere attributes suffering to the divine essence. Why, then, does Gregory go farther than Augustine, to make this willing knowledge of the neighbor’s experience essential to that in which human love imitates divine love? I propose this answer: For Gregory, compassion is not merely the outcome of a love by which one imitates God’s mercy ad extra, the love for creatures that flows from divine goodness. Rather, compassion is the love by which human beings imitate God’s love ad intra, the love that binds the Father and the Son. Compassion is not the divine economy as humanly lived; compassion is the divine life as humanly lived. Compassionate love imitates not only God’s essential bonitas but also the Son’s eternal divine knowledge and love of the Father (i.e. the immanent life into which one is drawn). For Gregory, the compassionate love of Christ’s death echoes the Trinitarian embrace.67

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66 Gregory I, moral., 20.36.68–69 (OGM 1/3:156–158, trans. Bliss, *Moralia*, 2:471–472) (n. 65, 14). Quamuis uera compassio est passioni proximi ex largitate concurrere . . . . [Mediator] subuenire tamen moriendo hominibus uoluit . . . . nec uim nobis suae dilectionis ostenderet, nisi hoc quod a nobis tolleret ad tempus ipse sustineret. In a similar vein, although not applying it directly to the Incarnation, Gregory defines misericordia as a divine attribute in *moral.,* 20.32.63 (OGM 1/3:150–152, trans. Bliss, *Moralia*, 2:466–467) (n. 65, 14). Such names “are derived to [God] from human qualities,” “descending to words expressive of infirmity, so that as it were a kind of steps being made for us, and set beside us by the things that we see close to us, we may sometime be enabled to mount up to the high things of him.” Haec namque omnia ab humanis in illum qualitatibus tracta sunt, dum ad nostrae infirmitatis uerba descendit, ut quasi quibusdam nobis gradibus factis, et iuxta nos positis, per ea quae nobis vicina conspicimus ad summam eius ascendere quandoque ualeamus. “While, therefore, there is a coming down to the words of our mutability, by those, as being made a kind of steps, let him, who is able, mount up to the immutability of God, that he may see One showing jealousy without jealousy, one wroth without wrath, one repentant without sorrow or repentance, full of commiseration [misericors] without a wretched heart.” Dum ergo ad uerba mutabilitatis nostrae descenditur, ex eis quibusdam gradibus factis ascendat qui potest ad incommutabilitatem Dei, ut uidet sine zelo zelantem, sine ira irascentem, sine dolore et paenitentia paenitentem, sine misero corde misericordem.

67 Gregory has already signaled that the godhead is the root of what Christ expresses in his compassionate death. He
The Lord immediately adds here: “Just as the Father has known me, and I recognize the Father and lay down my life for my sheep” [John 10:15]. As if to say openly: “In this it is certain that I know the Father and am known by him: that I lay down my life for my sheep. That is, by the charity by which I die on behalf of the sheep, I show how much I love the Father.”68

The Son’s human love-unto-death translates both God’s essential bonitas and the mutual love and knowledge that are the life of Father and Son in the unity of that essence. All Christ’s ad extra acts, divine and human, can be called “compassionate” insofar as they echo the inner embrace. But why is this? How can the Father and Son be called “compassionate” in their passionless and simple love? Consider how Gregory describes the compassion shown by Christ:

[H]e gives perfectly who, together with what he offers [externally] to the afflicted, also takes into himself the mind of the afflicted; that he should first transfer the suffering of the person sorrowing into himself, and [only] then . . . meet the sorrow of that person by an [outward] act of service.69

The core of compassion is a free cognitive and affective assimilation of oneself to one’s neighbor.70 As Gregory writes elsewhere, Paul “takes each one into himself and transforms himself into each one, by compassionating [compatiendo] with them” so that “he may remodel [reficere] another in himself, [and take] account of himself in another.”71 Now, stripping away all notions of

maintains that focus by invoking the Father’s knowledge of the Son; therefore, I understand as divine the filial love and knowledge here in view. He does not locate suffering within the Godhead. Instead, the suffering that accompanies human compassion comes about as a result of the suffering that already afflicts the life of one’s neighbor. The life of utter sharing (indeed identity) of mind that is characteristic of the persons of the Trinity does not involve suffering, nor does Gregory depict the persons as entering by will into an alliance of compassion with one another, since they possess but one mind, and one will, as one God. Compassion is therefore an analogical imitation rather than a replication of the unity of Father and Son.


70 Gregory writes of the ideal spiritual ruler in Gregory I, past., 1.10 (OGM 7:28, trans. Demacopoulos, Book, 43) (n. 14). “He should not lust for the possessions of others, but give freely of his own. He should be quick to forgive through compassion. . . . [but also] deplore the evil perpetrated by others as though it were his own. In his own heart, he must suffer the afflictions of others and likewise rejoice at the fortune of his neighbor as though the good thing were happening to him.” Qui ad aliena cupienda non ducitur, sed propria largitur. Qui per pietatis uiscera citius ad ignoscentium flectitur, sed numquam plus quam deceat ignoscens, ab arce rectitudinis inclinatur. Qui nulla illicita perpetrat, sed perpetrata ab alii ut propria deplorat. Qui ex affectu cordis alienae infirmitati compatitur, sicque in bonis proximi sicut in suis proiectibus laetatur.

71 Gregory I, moral., 6.35.54 (OGM 1/1:526, trans. Bliss, Moralia, 1:322) (n. 14). singulos in se suscipientis et se in singulis transfigurans, compatiendo colligeret, si ita ipse. Also: Speciem suam uisitat qui ut in se alterum reficiat, se in altero pensat.
change and suffering that we associate with human experience, we can locate the core of compassion: a total self-gift to the other through the utter reception of the other’s mind into oneself. In this gift, one receives an intimate knowledge of one’s neighbor, a communion beyond any other.

This, then, is how Christ’s compassionate death perfects the self-gift of the love of neighbor (perfecte tribuit)—by taking the “mind” (animus) of another into itself; \(^{72}\) this is how that same human love translates the mutual knowledge and love of Father and Son. \(^{73}\) This is why Christ’s death shows both the “force” of divine love for humanity and shows “how much I love the Father.” Lending further support to this interpretation, in a passage on the crucifixion, Gregory likens Christ’s human compassion to the divine embrace of Father and Son: As the Father is the Son’s “associate” (conscius) according to his divinity, so the Son—precisely in the suffering of the Cross—is conscius of humanity. Of the Father and the Son’s communion, Gregory writes:

[W]ith one will, and with one counsel, the Father acts always in union with the Son. Whose witness [testis] too he is, in that “no one knows the Son but the Father” [Matt. 11:27]. Thus [Christ] had then “a witness in heaven” and his “associate [conscius] on high” [Job 16:19], [even] when they, who saw him dying in the flesh, had their eyes closed against seeing the power of his divinity. \(^{74}\)

Of the Son’s relationship to all humanity by his human compassion, Gregory writes:

[He] is also rightly called “associate” [conscius], in that he has been acquainted with our nature, not only by creating, but also by taking it up. For his knowing is his having taken up what is ours. Whence too it is said by the Psalmist, “For he knows our frame” [Ps. 102:14 Vg.]. For what wonder is it if he is said specifically to “know our frame,” when it is certain that there is nothing that he does not know? But his knowing [scire] our frame is his having taken it upon himself from loving-kindness. \(^{75}\)

Christ’s compassion translates, into the world of distinct creaturely humans, the transcendent and simple intimacy of Father and Son who, together possessing the same single divine intellect and will, eternally give themselves over to one another in knowledge and love, in the unity of the

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\(^{73}\) See Gregory I, in euang., 1.14.4 (SC 485:322; Hurst, Forty Gospel Homilies, 110) (n. 64). Quoted earlier at n. 68.


Holy Spirit. If compassion expresses something essential to the love that is given to humans by the Holy Spirit, then what else could it be but a human likeness of the inner mutual knowledge and love of Father and Son in the single divine essence?

4. The Unity of the Two Gregories

Now we can see how Gregory can be an Augustinian and yet be separated from Augustine by the “gap” of contemplative vision as a regular feature of Christian life. In his De trinitate, Augustine asserts that the economy reveals God’s immanent life. Extending this principle, Gregory has received Augustine’s notion of compassionate mercy and followed it further than did Augustine, finding in it not only a human translation of the divine goodness from which springs God’s love for creatures, but also a human translation of Trinitarian life. This allows Gregory to keep Cassian’s definition of the basis for vision (likeness to the unity of Father and Son) while intensifying Augustine’s description of how a God-like love is to be lived (merciful compassion). Thus, while Augustine looked forward to regular vision only beyond the horizon of death, and Cassian only in retreat, Gregory could confidently assert:

[E]ach soul will be so high in knowledge of God [cognitione Dei] as it is broad in love of neighbor [amore proximi]. For while it spreads itself out [dilatat] through love it exalts itself above by knowledge [per cognitionem] . . . . Let us be spread in charity’s affection [in affectu caritatis] that we may be exalted in the glory of highness. Through love let us have compassion [compatiamur per amorem] on our neighbor that we may be joined together by knowledge of God [coniungamur per cognitionem]. Let us stoop to the least of our brethren on earth, and let us be made equal to the angels in heaven.76

This principle is illustrated in Gregory’s Dialogues. There, Benedict initially sets fidelity to his claustral rule over his sister’s desire to converse through the night, but he is forced to accede by a thunderstorm that she procures “who loved more.”77 A chapter later, Benedict prolongs an evening in loving discourse with a visiting abbot and, after this, receives his great contemplative vision.78 Breadth in compassion has brought him to height in knowledge.79 Gregory, who in his Book of


78 Gregory I, dial. 2.35 (OGM 4:204; Costello, Life, 164–165) (n. 77).

Pastoral Rule counseled all leaders to do likewise, wrote to his fellow bishop Dominic of Carthage that the “pattern” (forma) of heavenly praise is “displayed on earth... through our compassion.” And of the whole Church, it bears repeating, he taught that “there is no station among the faithful from which the grace of contemplation can be excluded.” Only in light of Gregory’s teaching on compassion could such statements be anything more than wishful thinking, given both his theological inheritance and his own experience.

Gregory’s creative re-negotiation of clashing traditions both answered his own aspirations and gave his tumultuous age a needed account of worldly affairs as spiritual affairs. As Demacopoulos suspected would be the case, it is in Gregory’s asceticism—here considered theologically through his transformative reception of Augustine—that we are able to discover an underlying basis for the unity of the two Gregories. For there are not two Christian lives, but one, in which one imitates Christ on the mountain and in the city, not finally in an unresolvable dialectical tension but in a difficult yet ultimately harmonious embrace of compassion as an imitation of the Cross, the Incarnation, and, most importantly, the unity of Father and Son.


80 Again, see quotation at n. 14.


82 Gregory I, in Ezech., 2.5.19 (OGM 3/2:142; Tomkinson, Homilies, 348) (n. 11). Quoted in n. 11.