

St. Augustine as an Orthodox Father: Confronting the Philosophical Ineptitude of His Critics

Matthew Raphael JohnSon
Johnstown, PA

Augustine is a saint in the Orthodox church. He's explicitly mentioned as a Father of the church in the *acta* of the Fifth Ecumenical Synod. The often strange Orthodox attacks on him are misplaced for many reasons, one of which is that the African doctor's literary output is so massive that one can find anything in there. However, many doing the attacking are not exactly philosophers. In this case, I'm using a short book written by Archbishop Gregory of Colorado: *Bishop Augustine of Hippo: His Life and His Heresies*. It's a pithy, succinct listing of the most common attacks on the great Father.¹

The Fifth Ecumenical Synod says in 553, Session I:

We further declare that we hold fast to the decrees of the four Councils, and in every way follow the holy Fathers, Athanasius, Hilary, Basil, Gregory the Theologian, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, Theophilus, John (Chrysostom) of Constantinople, Cyril, **Augustine**, Proclus, Leo and their writings on the true faith.

For with us the holy multitude of the supernal spirits adore one Lord Jesus Christ. Moreover several letters of **Augustine**, of most religious memory, who shone forth resplendent among the African bishops, were read, showing that it was quite right that heretics should be anathematized after death. And this ecclesiastical tradition, the other most reverend bishops of Africa have preserved: and the holy Roman Church as well had anathematized certain bishops after their death, although they had not been accused of any falling from the faith during their lives: and of each we have the evidence in our hands.

The mental gymnastics his enemies go through to deny this sentence is bizarre. To his Orthodox critics: you don't know better than the Fathers of this Synod do. You claim to be dedicated to the Synods. Unless, usually, they refer to usury, Augustine or economics. Then, suddenly, you have "explanations" as to why the Fathers are to be ignored. Augustine is singled out above and beyond the other Fathers for his letters on various issues. Still, you're not impressed.

Normally, Augustine is attacked for two main reasons: the first is that he "invented" the filioque doctrine. That is, the error that the Holy Spirit is generated by both the Father and the Son at the same time. The second, in one form or another, is that Augustine believes in predestination and hence, both overplays original sin and rejects free will. These are the essential problems, though there are many others that have cropped up in Orthodox circles over the years.

Metropolitan Gregory does not pretend to be a philosopher, but he has decided to take on a towering figure of theological and metaphysical thought. This is often a mistake regardless of the issues involved. The two reasons above make up the bulk of the book, with the others being

¹ As far as I know, it exists only online here:
http://www.trueorthodoxy.org/heretics_roman_catholics_augustine.shtml

fairly obscure topics too minor to relegate him to the “heretic” category. The other issues, such as his alleged recognition of “heretical baptisms,” are highly ambiguous and nuanced. A quote here and there establishes nothing on issues like this.

However, it should be dispatched regardless. This is not an easy concern, since he famously states, “There are two propositions, moreover, which we affirm,—that baptism exists in the Catholic Church, and that in it alone can it be rightly received,—both of which the Donatists deny” (Against the Donatists on Baptism, ch 2-3). Also from Ch 11-15,

And what is regeneration in baptism, except the being renovated from the corruption of the old man? And how can he be so renovated whose past sins are not remitted? But if he be not regenerate, neither does he put on Christ; from which it seems to follow that he ought to be baptized again.

This is not the end of the matter. He does, if the form of baptism is correct, not require rebaptism in most cases. The Donatists – who were at issue here – changed nothing about the faith, rites or practices. They were merely in schism. Augustine simply says their pride prevents them from returning to the true church. In other words, since the Donatists – outside of that particular issue – differed in no way from the church, the reception of converts would then declare the baptism valid, but not because it was performed elsewhere.

Even in those places where he suggests a real baptism exists outside the church, it's a meaningless technicality, since it not only does not benefit the man, but actively harms him. In fact, it is a sin to receive baptism outside the church. Hence, to make the claim that he accepts heretical baptism in the sense that an ecumenist would is slander easily refuted with a small amount of effort.

One essential area that does need extended treatment is the filioque. Augustine rejects it as a theological doctrine. However, since he lived before this became an earth-shattering issue, he is loose with his language. In brief, Augustine holds that the Spirit proceeds from the Father (as a matter of generation), but through the Son (as a matter of history). This is the well known distinction between the eternal and temporal procession of the Spirit. This is a common patristic position held by St. John of Damascus and many others.

It should dawn on Augustine's enemies that he recited a liturgy daily that did not contain the filioque in the creed. Another salient fact is that he wrote in Latin. Unfortunately, Roman Latin had a fairly small vocabulary in contrast to the Greek, so citing a quote now and again without context tells us nothing.

Augustine writes:

As for the Son to be born is to be from the Father, so for the Son to be sent is to be known in his origin from the Father. In the same way, as for the Holy Spirit to be the gift of God is to proceed from the Father, so to be sent is to be known in his procession from the Father. What is more, we cannot deny that the Spirit also proceeds from the Son... I cannot see what he could otherwise have meant when, breathing on the faces of the disciples, the Lord declared: Receive the Holy Spirit (Jn 20:20, cited from Congar, 1983).

Of course, Augustine means this in a relative sense. No Orthodox man denies that Christ did “send” the Holy Spirit in this manner. This is not, however, an absolute relationship. It is not

a relationship from eternity, but a matter of temporal succession. Augustine qualifies this in the following passage:

There is no need for anxiety about the absence, it would seem, of a term that corresponds to him and points to his correlative. We speak of the servant of the master or of the master of the servant, of the Son of the Father or of the Father of the Son, since these terms are correlative, but here we cannot speak in that way. We speak of the Holy Spirit of the Father; we do not speak in the reverse sense of the Father to the Holy Spirit; if we did, the Holy Spirit would be taken to be his Son. In the same way, we speak of the Holy Spirit of the Son, but not of the Son of the Holy Spirit, since, in that case, the Holy Spirit would be seen as his Father (ibid).

This is a denial of the filioque as an ontological property. That is, as an “eternal” procession rather than the gradual building up of the church over time. Christ sends the Holy Spirit in the manner above, but this is not the nature of their relationship in eternity. Since Augustine wants to preserve the “correlation,” he has two relationships, the Father to Son, and the Father to the Spirit. This is amplified here:

The Father is not possessed in common as Father by the Son and the Holy Spirit, because he is not the Father of the two. The Son is not possessed in common as Son by the Father and the Holy Spirit, because he is not the Son of the two. But the Holy Spirit is possessed in common by the Father and the Son, because he is the one Spirit of the two.’ (From Augustine's *de Trinitate*, cited from Congar, 1983)

Keep in mind that Augustine recited the Liturgy of St. Ambrose that does not use the filioque in the creed. In fact, none of them could have at the time. The broader point is that the Latin language, as has been pointed out many times, does not have the vocabulary for such a discussion. The Latin “*procedere*” means, of course, “to proceed.” However, it does not in the least imply any kind of ontological “creation” in or out of time. Using this infinitive means that Augustine can speak of the procession of the Spirit from the Son in the practical sense mentioned above, not relating at all to the ontological “procession” the Greeks stressed so powerfully.

The Spirit came into the world as the “manifestation” of the church in its fullness only after the Ascension into heaven. In this limited sense does Christ serve as the “origin” of the Spirit, but this is only a limited and not absolute sense. After all, Palamas writes,

The Spirit of the Word is like a love of the Father for the mysteriously begotten Word, and it is the same love that the beloved Word and Son of the Father has for the one who begot him. That love comes from the Father at the same time as it is with the Son and it naturally rests on the Son (Palamas, c 36).

Thus, Palamas agrees with Augustine that the Spirit is the unity of love between Father and Son without making an ontological statement at all. Augustine also states:

And yet it is not to no purpose that in this Trinity the Son and none other is called the Word of God, and the Holy Spirit and none other the Gift of God, and God the

Father alone is He from whom the Word is born, and from whom the Holy Spirit principally proceeds. And therefore I have added the word principally, because we find that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son also. But the Father gave Him this too, not as to one already existing, and not yet having it; but whatever He gave to the only-begotten Word, He gave by begetting Him. Therefore He so begat Him as that the common Gift should proceed from Him also, and the Holy Spirit should be the Spirit of both (On the Holy Trinity, c 17)

This justifies my thesis: Augustine rejects the filioque as an ontological reality, but accepts it as a practical “building up” of the church on earth. In saying he “principally proceeds” Augustine means that he ontologically is generated by the Father. The concept of “principle” is often used by the Scholastics as “essence.”

Augustine explains himself in precisely this manner. Ontologically the Spirit proceeds from the Father, but this in no way removes the clear relationship that the Son's sacrifice paved the way for Pentecost later. This is the origin of the well known “eternal” versus “temporal” procession. There is a practical mode of procession and that of an ontological generation. The Latin “*procedere*” can mean both or either. Augustine means “from the Father through the Son” which is certainly not unheard of in the Greek Fathers.

When dealing with the question of Tritheism, Gregory of Nyssa states:

If, however, any one cavils at our argument, on the ground that by not admitting the difference of nature it leads to a mixture and confusion of the Persons, we shall make to such a charge this answer;--that while we confess the invariable character of the nature, we do not deny the difference in respect of cause, and that which is caused, by which alone we apprehend that one Person is distinguished from another;--by our belief, that is, that one is the Cause, and another is of the Cause; and again in that which is of the Cause we recognize another distinction. For one is directly from the first Cause, and another by that which is directly from the first Cause; so that the attribute of being Only-begotten abides without doubt in the Son, and the interposition of the Son, while it guards His attribute of being Only-begotten, does not shut out the Spirit from His relation by way of nature to the Father (Not Three Gods; Letter To Ablabius, V, 336)

This has been the problem all along. One's formulation of the issue – long before it became a polemical concern – had to do with the context. Of course Gregory will stress the unity of God when he's arguing there are not three separate gods. Augustine was doing the same.

St. Cyril of Alexandria, the enemy of Nestorianism, wrote in his Thesaurus (c. 424) “Since the Holy Spirit when He is in us effects our being conformed to God, and He actually proceeds from Father and Son, it is abundantly clear that He is of the divine essence, in it in essence and proceeding from it.” The context is everything. Pope St. Damasus I in the Acts of the Council of Rome (382) declared:

The Holy Spirit is not of the Father only, or the Spirit of the Son only, but He is the Spirit of the Father and the Son. For it is written, “If anyone loves the world, the Spirit of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15); and again it is written: “If anyone, however, does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is none of His” (Romans

8:9, Damasus, 405ff).

Yet, this is saying nothing more than St. John: “Nevertheless I tell you the truth; it is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you” (John 17:7). St. Augustine does not believe in the “eternal procession” of the Spirit via the Father and Son. The liturgy he used every day did not contain it. However, the context is his war on Manicheans and its infamous dualism. Just like Cyril or Damasus above were not speaking eternally or ontologically, neither was Augustine. The context must be clear. For Augustine, the context was fighting for the unity of God against the dualism of the pagans.

Original Sin too has been equally misunderstood. Accusing Augustine of denying the free will has much less excuse than the question of the Spirit, since he wrote one of his most famed books defending precisely this freedom. He writes:

But we must first consider the mind in itself before it is a partaker of God, and before his image is to be found in it. For we have said that, even though it has become impaired and disfigured by the loss of its participation in God, the mind remains nonetheless an image of God. For it is his image by the very fact that it is capable of him, and can be a partaker of him; and it cannot be so great a good except that it is his image.’ (50 cf. Mor. 2.4.6; PL 32:1347)

‘But while the soul is still hankering for carnal pleasures, it is called ‘flesh’ and resists the Spirit . This resistance does not spring from the soul’s nature but from a habit of sin)...This habit of sin has been grafted on our nature through human generation (birth) as a result, of the first man’s sin’

While this is speculative, the opposition to St. Augustine might have a root, one of many, in his views of schism. Part of the experience of the Donatist controversy was his doctrine that part of our lives as Christians was to deal with the sins and errors of others. The True Orthodox Church has negated whatever vision it ever had. In the endless mutual recrimination and profoundly sinful, non-dogmatic schisms, the True Church has been rendered infantile.

With a few exceptions, all of these schisms since the 1930s, numbering in the hundreds, are based on non-dogmatic grounds. The reasons for schism are so technical and irrelevant that there is no doubt its just a pretext.

Predestination is, of course, connected with Original Sin. It is argued that Luther, being an Augustinian, took the doctor's doctrine literally and made it the center of Lutheranism. Augustine does not believe in predestination because he accepts and argues vehemently for free will. He writes,

Now He has revealed to us, through His Holy Scriptures, that there is in a man a free choice of will. But how He has revealed this I do not recount in human language, but in divine. There is, to begin with, the fact that God’s precepts themselves would be of no use to a man unless he had free choice of will, so that by performing them he might obtain the promised rewards. For they are given that no one might be able to plead the excuse of ignorance, as the Lord says concerning the Jews in the gospel: If I had not come and spoken unto them, they

would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin.

These two doctrines cannot exist at the same time. Now, God knows not only the future, but all possible routes that human action can take and all their consequences. None of that has any bearing on the actions of a man relative to the moral law. This is also the Orthodox position and is inherent in the term “omniscient.” To the extent that God is such, predestination – though not free will as such – is inherently the case. Man's lack of knowledge is sufficient for predestination to not only be false, but irrelevant for men. Otherwise, you have to argue that God is ignorant of these facts.

In his *De Gratia Christi*, Augustine states: “For not only has God given us our ability and helps it, but He even works [to assist--MRJ] willing and acting in us; not that we do not will or that we do not act, but that without His help we neither will anything good nor do it (Augustine, 25-26). This is also Orthodox doctrine.

Orthodox people attack the Catholic conception of “earning salvation” and “merits.” This view of “predestination” can be the only other alternative. The west is damned if they do and damned if they don't.

In the *City of God*, he writes:

Hence there is a condemned mass of the whole human race . . . so that no one would be freed from this just and due punishment except by mercy and undue grace; and so the human race is divided [into two parts] so that in some it may be shown what merciful grace can do, in others, what just vengeance can do. . . . In it [punishment] there are many more than in [mercy] so that in this way there may be shown what is due to all (Augustine, 21: 12).

The eastern Fathers thought the same. St. Clement of Alexandria says:

Therefore in substance and idea, in origin, in pre-eminence, we say that the ancient and Catholic Church is alone, collecting as it does into the unity of the one faith—which results from the peculiar Testaments, or rather the one Testament in different times by the will of the one God, through one Lord—those already ordained, whom God predestined, knowing before the foundation of the world that they would be righteous. (The Stromata, Book VII, Chapter XVII).

Even St. John Chrysostom states:

It is not idly and to no purpose that this happens, but on account of what was due to take place shortly afterwards. In his foreknowledge of it, God shows us the great intelligence with which he endowed the being created by him, so that when the event occurs of the transgression of the instruction given by God, you won't think the human being sinned through ignorance but will be in a position to know that it was a sin of sloth. I mean, the fact of his being lavishly endowed with intelligence, learn from what happens now (Homily 14 on Genesis, 190).

They say nothing unorthodox, but merely that God remains sovereign over the world, and, from His point of view, it is just, ordered and harmonious. It is only our own sin that makes

it seem chaotic.

Before them all, St. Justin says to Trypho:

And this prophecy proves that we shall behold this very King with glory; and the very terms of the prophecy declare loudly, that the people foreknown to believe in Him were fore-known to pursue diligently the fear of the Lord. Moreover, these Scriptures are equally explicit in saying, that those who are reputed to know the writings of the Scriptures, and who hear the prophecies, have no understanding (Chapter 70).

Pope Leo the Great says,

For since both the character of our actions and the fulfillment of all our wishes are fore-known to God, how much better known to Him are His own works? And He was rightly pleased that things should be recorded as if done which nothing could hinder from being done. And hence when the Apostles also, being full of the Holy Ghost, suffered the threats and cruelty of Christ's enemies, they said to God with one consent, "For truly in this city against Thy holy Servant Jesus, Whom Thou hast anointed, Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel were gathered together to do what Thy hand and Thy counsel ordained to come to pass." Did then the wickedness of Christ's persecutors spring from God's plan, and was that unsurpassable crime prefaced and set in motion by the hand of God? Clearly we must not think this of the highest Justice: that which was fore-known in respect of the Jews' malice is far different, indeed quite contrary to what was ordained in respect of Christ's Passion (Sermon 67, On the Passion)

Hundreds more of these can be cited. From these, one can easily realize that Augustine was perfectly in line with the Greek Fathers. It is true that Latin was not the best language for this sort of writing, especially in the Roman era, but that this is not noticed by those attacking him suggests the level of understanding being employed.

The church Fathers were educated in Greek and Roman classics, masters of the Greek and Latin languages, and saturated in the metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle. The Orthodox church is immensely Platonic in its metaphysics. This was foreordained by God. It is no accident that Christ came at the height of the Roman empire, where the Greek intellectual tradition was intimately known to all educated persons.

It is also not an accident that Christ is from Galilee, or Decapolis, a heavily Greek part of eastern Rome. The boundaries of Europe were very different than they are in 2017. The culture in which Christ was born was a Greek one. Therefore, Greek philosophy and metaphysics – not some vague “paganism” – was the intellectual context of the New Testament. This is not an accident. Like the others, Augustine used the best of ancient philosophy and the politics of his day – providentially determined to spread the faith – with Christ's showing himself to man.

Those denying Augustine as a church father go against the Fifth Ecumenical Synod, making them schismatics. Most haven't read the man, and if they have, only a handful of works. They are normally content to copy online condemnations over and again.

Bibliography

Justin, the Martyr and Philosopher. Dialogue with Trypho. Early Christian Writings, Ed, Peter Kirby, 2011

Leo. Sermons. Library of Post-Nicene Fathers. Erdnmans, 1894

Clement of Alexandria. The Stromata. From the Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 2. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885

Congar, Yves. Augustine, the Trinity and the Filioque. From Volume three of his work I Believe in the Holy Spirit. Part B, chapter 1, 1983

Palamas, Gregory. 150 Chapters. Cap. 36 (PG 1150, 1144D-1145A)

Augustine. On the Holy Trinity. Library of Post-Nicene Fathers. Erdnmans, 1883

Gregory of Nyssa. Not Three Gods. Library of Nicene Fathers, Erdnmans, 1893

Damsus, Pope. Decrees. Faith of the Early Fathers, Ed., WA Jurgens. Liturgical Press, 1978