The "Woman" of Augustine of Hippo

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According to Henry Chadwick in his volume entitled "The Early Church," Augustine by the range and profundity of his mind came to tower not only over all his immediate contemporaries but over the subsequent development of Western Christendom.1

His prodigious influence on the history of the Christian church can be discerned in both Catholicism and Protestantism, and it was "from Augustine more than any other theologian that medieval thought took its theological framework of ideas."2 As a result, his view of women had a profound effect on the developing Christian church. However, any critical discussion of Augustine's attitude toward women as derived from his discursive texts must take into account the nature of his philosophical and social milieu, and its predominant view of women.

Augustine was born at Thagaste, in Numidia, of a lower middle-class family. His father, Patrick, converted to Christianity only shortly before his death, but Monica, Augustine's mother was a devout believer and had a profound influence on his life, as he wrote later in his Confessions. He described her as "womanly in her dress but virile in her faith, mature in her serenity, motherly in her love, Christian in her piety."3 It is interesting to note that Augustine was moved to use a masculine adjective ("virile") in describing his mother's faith. The significance of this will become more apparent as this discussion progresses.

Augustine completed his education in Carthage, acquiring "an easy mastery of Latin literature."4 Upon the death of his father, he was forced to support his family, teaching rhetoric at Carthage, Rome and finally Milan, where he hoped to utilize the influence of friends to obtain a provincial governorship. His conversion to Christianity in 386 A.D. indelibly altered the direction of his life.

Although he had been signed with the cross at birth, his mother postponed his baptism, subscribing to the common belief of his day that the act of baptism washed away all sins committed prior to its administration. She "wished him to defer it until after the heat of youth was passed and with it the excesses of that ardent age."5

Augustine spent much of his youth in the sexual profligacy common to the men of that day, at seventeen taking a concubine with whom he had a son. Henry Chadwick attests to the acceptability of this custom, even within the church:

"How conventional and respectable this then was is illustrated by a canon of a Spanish synod of 400 decreeing that, so long as a man was faithful to his concubine as if she was a wife, their relationship constituted no bar to communion. Pope Leo I thought monogamy preserved if a man left his concubine to contract a legal marriage."6

This utilitarian view of women was common to pagan culture, as evidenced by the distinctions made by Greek men who assigned women class divisions on the basis of social function. The wife was considered primarily as a reproductive necessity, valued neither for her intellect nor the sexual pleasure she gave. Unfortunately, the early church began to adopt and "sanctify" the dualistic thought patterns encouraging such distinctions, rather than serving as God's agent to change this area of pervasive social oppression and injustice.

Two aspects of Augustine's philosophical pilgrimage should be mentioned prior to considering his writings on the topic of women. First, in the year of the birth of his son, Augustine's mind began to turn back to Christianity, influenced primarily by a desire for truth enflamed by one of Cicero's philosophical dialogues. But the "style of scripture seemed to him... inferior to the Latin classics"; he "despised the Old Testament as old wives' fables"; and he believed the church to be a "body lacking in cultural distinction."7 It is not surprising, therefore, that he became enamored with the Manichaen sect, who both rejected the Old Testament and appealed to reason.

Second, after nine years he became disillusioned with the Manichees. Moving to Milan, Augustine became acquainted with the preaching of Ambrose, who combined devotion to Christianity with Neoplatonic mysticism. Neoplatonism appeared to answer the objections of the Manichees to the Old Testament, and captured the introspective mind of Augustine. His conversions to Christianity and Neoplatonism "were so nearly simultaneous that it was many years before he began to be seriously critical of Platonism as a religious metaphysic."8

Although Augustine perceived clear differences between Manichaeism and Neoplatonism, it is important for the purposes of this analysis to realize that both were to some extent dualistic in their construct of reality, emphasizing the "flesh/spirit" dichotomy. Because the "flesh" was identified with the physical body and therefore, by extension, with the base physical appetites, human sexuality was, at best, regarded as an unfortunate but functional necessity of procreation and, at worst, identified as the efficient cause of the Fall of mankind.
through the seduction of Adam by Eve. Accordingly, in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, Augustine speculates as to how Adam, being already spiritual "in mind" could have been led astray. He concludes that this was one of the reasons "woman was given to man, woman who was of small intelligence and who perhaps still lives more in accordance with the promptings of the inferior flesh than by the superior reason... that through her the man became guilty of transgression." Assuming woman's natural inferiority, Augustine asks, "Is this why the apostle Paul does not attribute the image of God to her?" In response to this, Tucker and Liefeld, in their comprehensive work *Daughters of the Church*, include the following observation:

"Rosemary Reuther, referring to Augustine's view that the relationship of woman to man is similar to that of body to spirit, and to his conclusion that only the man possesses the full image of God, calls this 'perhaps the ultimate core of misogyny.'"11

Although Genesis affirms the natural correspondence by creation of woman and man (Gen. 2:18b - *eter kenegdo*, a "helper corresponding to"), Augustine's exegesis of I Cor. 11:7b ("... for he is the image and glory of God, but the woman is the glory of man.") denies the image of God to woman by creation. The emphasis is placed, rather, on the manner in which Eve was meant to be a "helper" of Adam. Here, the pervasive effect of culture can be more easily discerned. In his *On the Good of Marriage*, Augustine stresses the mystery of the two-become-one unity of husband and wife, postulating that:

"God willed... to create all humans from one person, so that they might be held fast in their society not only by likeness of descent, but also by the bond of relationship. Thus the first tie of natural human society is the husband and wife. And yet God did not make each one separately and then join them... he created one from the other. For they were joined to each other from the sides, they who walk side by side, they who look together where it is they walk."12

This might indicate that Augustine held more than a simply utilitarian view of womankind. However, in his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, the woman is found, figuratively speaking, walking behind the man, barefoot and pregnant. Augustine reasons that for purposes of either companionship or assistance in physical labor, another man would have been a more suitable "helper" than a woman. He concludes:

"If it were not the case that the woman was created to be a man's helper specifically for the production of children, then why would she have been created as 'helper' (Gen. 2:18)?...I cannot think of any reason for a woman's being made as a man's helper, if we dismiss the reason of procreation."13

Such was Augustine's identification of sexuality with the "carnal" or "fleshly" aspect of humanity that he appeared to consider any desire for the enjoyment of the marriage bed lustful. Although Elizabeth A. Clark considers it noteworthy that Augustine did not consider the act of procreation itself to be sinful, thus making it possible for him to hold "a stronger appreciation of marriage than... some other Church Fathers," it should still be emphasized that his despair over "the alluring sting of passion" which characterized conjugal union seemed to forbid the very enjoyment of the only purpose women were permitted.

Perhaps in this we can see the regret that Augustine held for his former prodigality, and his reaction against it, as beginning the inexorable move of the Roman church toward celibacy as an ideal. (It is, in fact, interesting to note that Augustine proposed that had the Fall not occurred, the procreative act could have been accomplished with no loss of the woman's virginity.)

Nevertheless, the inherent, though perhaps unintentional, misogyny inherent in this extreme dualism pushed an avoidance of sexual enjoyment into teaching that a denial of the woman's gender-identity was necessary for a woman to achieve fulfillment within early and medieval Christendom. (Remember Augustine's description of his Christian mother, whom he loved, as "virile" in her faith.) It is this belief which perhaps subconsciously continues to mitigate against the full participation of women in the church of Jesus Christ today.

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4 Chadwick, *op. cit.*, p. 216.
7 *ibid.*
8 ibid., p. 218.
10 ibid.
12 Clark, *op. cit.*, p. 28.
13 *ibid.*
14 *ibid.*, p. 44.
15 *ibid.*, p. 46.
16 *ibid.*