

CTSP, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition

## Saint Augustine

354-430

*On Christian Doctrine* brings Augustine to the attention of semioticians and literary theorists. Thought about the sign is not new with him, but he formulated a theory of it that gave it particular importance in the tradition of Christian interpretation of Scripture and paved the way for later elaborate theories of allegory, such as those we see in Saint Thomas Aquinas (below, page 149) and Dante (below, page 153). For Augustine, signs are "things used to signify something," and words are things the whole use of which is signification. But if all signs are things, not all things are signs. Here he seems to resist any elaborate construction of a complete theory of "correspondences" such as is found in certain later mystics and symbolist critics like Baudelaire (below, page 604), where all nature is an occult language. A sign is important because it points to something else, and that something is ultimately for Augustine the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The sign, therefore, is not valuable as pleasurable in itself but rather in its movement of signification toward God. Signs cannot embody God, however, because God is ineffable. When Augustine speaks of enjoyment it is not enjoyment of the aesthetic surface of the sign, but of its ultimate signified. This view leads to concepts of allegory in medieval criticism in which the surface hides, but then yields, a depth of intellectual beauty. Thus Augustine is a predecessor of recent secular valorizations of allegory over symbolism, the former of which implies a difference between sign and signified and the latter of which implies the signified incarnate in the symbol.

Augustine's treatment of a passage from the Song of Solomon in the selection below has been much cited. In it he reads the passage allegorically and admits failure to understand fully why the passage's figurative language gives him more pleasure than a nonfigurative expression of the same idea would. He tentatively ventures that what is discovered with difficulty gives pleasure, this notion being frequently repeated even into Renaissance criticism. The distinction that Augustine draws between the natural and the conventional sign leads in later language theory to the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign, as in Locke (below, page 281) and Saussure (below, page 786).

Saint Augustine's works (in Latin) are collected in *Opera omnia* (1836-1838). See H. J. Marrou, *Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique* (1938); Étienne Gilson, *Introduction à l'étude de saint Augustin* (1939); R. W. Battenhouse et al., *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine* (1955); Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (1967); Robert A. Markus, ed., *Augustine: A Collection of Critical Essays* (contains B. D. Jackson's "The Theory of Signs in St. Augustine's *De doctrina Christiana*") (1972); Robert E. Meagher, *An Introduction to St. Augustine* (1972); Robert J. O'Connell, *Art and Christian Intelligence in St. Augustine* (1978); Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (1986); Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (1992); Gary Wills, *Saint Augustine* (1999).

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<sup>1</sup>[Robertson] Matt. 1:  
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from  
**On Christian Doctrine**  
*see HA, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.*

from  
**Book One**

*I*

1. There are two things necessary to the treatment of the Scriptures: a way of discovering those things which are to be understood, and a way of teaching what we have learned. We shall speak first of discovery and second of teaching. This is a great and arduous work, and since it is difficult to sustain, I fear some temerity in undertaking it. It would be thus indeed if I relied on myself alone, but now while the hope of completing such a work lies in Him from whom I have received much concerning these things in thought, it is not to be feared that He will cease giving me more when I have begun to use what He has already given me. Everything which does not decrease on being given away is not properly owned when it is owned and not given. For He says, "He that hath, to him shall be given."<sup>1</sup> Therefore He will give to those that have, that is, to those benevolently using that which they have received He will increase and heap up what He gives. There were at one time five loaves and at another time seven before they began to be given to the needy;<sup>2</sup> and when this began to be done, baskets and hampers were filled, although thousands of men were fed. Just as the loaves increased when they were broken, the Lord has granted those things necessary to the beginning of this work, and when they begin to be given out they will be multiplied by His inspiration, so that in this task of mine I shall not only suffer no poverty of ideas but shall rejoice in wonderful abundance.

*II*

2. All doctrine concerns either things or signs, but things are learned by signs. Strictly speaking, I have here

Saint Augustine's *On Christian Doctrine* was begun in about 396 and completed in 426. The text is from D.W. Robertson, Jr., tr., *On Christian Doctrine* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1958). Reprinted by permission of Pearson Education, Inc., Upper Saddle River, NJ.

<sup>1</sup>[Robertson] Matt. 13.12.

<sup>2</sup>[Robertson] Matt. 14.17; 215.34.

called a "thing" that which is not used to signify something else, like wood, stone, cattle, and so on; but not that wood concerning which we read that Moses cast it into bitter waters that their bitterness might be dispelled,<sup>3</sup> nor that stone which Jacob placed at his head,<sup>4</sup> nor that beast which Abraham sacrificed in place of his son.<sup>5</sup> For these are things in such a way that they are also signs of other things.<sup>6</sup> There are other signs whose whole use is in signifying, like words. For no one uses words except for the purpose of signifying something. From this may be understood what we call "signs"; they are things used to signify something. Thus every sign is also a thing, for that which is not a thing is nothing at all; but not every thing is also a sign. And thus in this distinction between things and signs, when we speak of things, we shall so speak that, although some of them may be used to signify something else, this fact shall not disturb the arrangement we have made to speak of things as such first and of signs later. We should bear in mind that now we are to consider what things are, not what they signify beyond themselves.

*III*

3. Some things are to be enjoyed, others to be used, and there are others which are to be enjoyed and used. Those things which are to be enjoyed make us blessed. Those things which are to be used help and, as it were, sustain us as we move toward blessedness in order that we may gain and cling to those things which make us blessed. If we who enjoy and use things, being placed in the midst of things of both kinds, wish to enjoy those things which should be used, our course will be impeded and sometimes deflected, so that we are retarded in obtaining those things which are to be enjoyed, or even prevented altogether, shackled by an inferior love.

*IV*

4. To enjoy something is to cling to it with love for its own sake. To use something, however, is to employ it in obtaining that which you love, provided that it is worthy of love. For an illicit use should be called rather a waste or an abuse. Suppose we were wanderers who could not live in blessedness except at home, miserable in our wandering and

<sup>3</sup>[Robertson] Exod. 15.25.

<sup>4</sup>[Robertson] Gen. 28.11.

<sup>5</sup>[Robertson] Gen. 22.13.

<sup>6</sup>That is, typological allegory. See Aquinas (below, page 151). [Robertson] According to St. Augustine the "wood" is a sign of the cross. The "stone" and the "beast" represent the human nature of Christ.

desiring to end it and to return to our native country. We would need vehicles for land and sea which could be used to help us to reach our homeland, which is to be enjoyed. But if the amenities of the journey and the motion of the vehicles itself delighted us, and we were led to enjoy those things which we should use, we should not wish to end our journey quickly, and, entangled in a perverse sweetness, we should be alienated from our country, whose sweetness would make us blessed. Thus in this mortal life, wandering from God,<sup>7</sup> if we wish to return to our native country where we can be blessed we should use this world and not enjoy it, so that the "invisible things" of God "being understood by the things that are made"<sup>8</sup> may be seen, that is, so that by means of corporal and temporal things we may comprehend the eternal and spiritual.

## V

5. The things which are to be enjoyed are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, a single Trinity, a certain supreme thing common to all who enjoy it, if, indeed, it is a thing and not rather the cause of all things, or both a thing and a cause. It is not easy to find a name proper to such excellence, unless it is better to say that this Trinity is one God and that "of him, and by him, and in him are all things."<sup>9</sup> Thus there are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and each is God, and at the same time all are one God; and each of them is a full substance, and at the same time all are one substance. The Father is neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit; the Son is neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. But the Father is the Father uniquely; the Son is the Son uniquely; and the Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit uniquely. All three have the same eternity, the same immutability, the same majesty, and the same power. In the Father is unity, in the Son equality, and in the Holy Spirit a concord of unity and equality; and these three qualities are all one because of the Father, all equal because of the Son, and all united because of the Holy Spirit.

## VI

6. Have we spoken or announced anything worthy of God? Rather I feel that I have done nothing but wish to speak: if I have spoken, I have not said what I wished to

say. Whence do I know this, except because God is ineffable? If what I said were ineffable, it would not be said. And for this reason God should not be said to be ineffable, for when this is said something is said. And a contradiction in terms is created, since if that is ineffable which cannot be spoken, then that is not ineffable which can be called ineffable. This contradiction is to be passed over in silence rather than resolved verbally. For God, although nothing worthy may be spoken of Him, has accepted the tribute of the human voice and wished us to take joy in praising Him with our words. In this way he is called *Deus*. Although He is not recognized in the noise of these two syllables, all those who know the Latin language, when this sound reaches their ears, are moved to think of a certain most excellent immortal nature.

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## XXXV

39. The sum of all we have said since we began to speak of things thus comes to this: it is to be understood that the plenitude and the end of the Law and of all the sacred Scriptures is the love of a Being which is to be enjoyed and of a being that can share that enjoyment with us, since there is no need for a precept that anyone should love himself. That we might know this and have the means to implement it, the whole temporal dispensation was made by divine Providence for our salvation. We should use it, not with an abiding but with a transitory love and delight like that in a road or in vehicles or in other instruments, or, if it may be expressed more accurately, so that we love those things by which we are carried along for the sake of that toward which we are carried.

## XXXVI

40. Whoever, therefore, thinks that he understands the divine Scriptures or any part of them so that it does not build the double love of God and of our neighbor does not understand it at all. Whoever finds a lesson there useful to the building of charity, even though he has not said what the author may be shown to have intended in that place, has not been deceived, nor is he lying in any way. Lying involves the will to speak falsely; thus we find many who wish to lie, but no one who wishes to be deceived. Since a man lies knowingly but suffers deception unwittingly, it is obvious that in a given instance a man who is deceived is better than a man who lies, because it is better to suffer iniquity than to perform it. Everyone who lies commits iniquity, and if anyone thinks a lie may sometimes be useful, he must think that

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<sup>7</sup>[Robertson] Cf. 2 Cor. 5.6 (Vulg.).

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<sup>9</sup>[Robertson] Rom. 1.36.

<sup>10</sup>[Robertson] 2 Co

iniquity is sometimes useful also. But no one who lies keeps faith concerning that about which he lies. For he wishes that the person to whom he lies should have that faith in him which he does not himself keep when he lies. But every violator of faith is iniquitous. Either iniquity is sometimes useful, which is impossible, or a lie is always useless.

41. But anyone who understands in the Scriptures something other than that intended by them is deceived, although they do not lie. However, as I began to explain, if he is deceived in an interpretation which builds up charity, which is the end of the commandments, he is deceived in the same way as a man who leaves a road by mistake but passes through a field to the same place toward which the road itself leads. But he is to be corrected and shown that it is more useful not to leave the road, lest the habit of deviating force him to take a crossroad or a perverse way.

### XXXVII

In asserting rashly that which the author before him did not intend, he may find many other passages which he cannot reconcile with his interpretation. If he acknowledges these to be true and certain, his first interpretation cannot be true, and under these conditions it happens, I know not why, that, loving his own interpretation, he begins to become angrier with the Scriptures than he is with himself. And if he thirsts persistently for the error, he will be overcome by it. "For we walk by faith and not by sight,"<sup>10</sup> and faith will stagger if the authority of the Divine Scriptures wavers. Indeed, if faith staggers, charity itself languishes. And if anyone should fall from faith, it follows that he falls also from charity, for a man cannot love that which he does not believe to exist. On the other hand, a man who both believes and loves, by doing well and by obeying the rules of good customs, may bring it about that he may hope to arrive at that which he loves. Thus there are these three things for which all knowledge and prophecy struggle: faith, hope, and charity.

### XXXVIII

42. But the vision we shall see will replace faith, and that blessedness to which we are to come will replace hope; and when these things are falling away, charity will be increased even more. If we love in faith what we have not seen, how much more will we love it when we begin to see it? And if we love in hope what we have not attained, how

<sup>10</sup>[Robertson] 2 Cor. 5.7.

much more will we love it when we have attained it? Between temporal and eternal things there is this difference: a temporal thing is loved more before we have it, and it begins to grow worthless when we gain it, for it does not satisfy the soul, whose true and certain rest is eternity; but the eternal is more ardently loved when it is acquired than when it is merely desired. It is possible for no one desiring it to expect it to be more valuable than it actually is so that he may find it less worthy than he expected it to be. However highly anyone approaching it may value it, he will find it more valuable when he attains it.

### XXXIX

43. Thus a man supported by faith, hope, and charity, with an unshaken hold upon them, does not need the Scriptures except for the instruction of others. And many live by these three things in solitude without books. Whence in these persons I think the saying is already exemplified, "whether prophecies shall be made void, or tongues shall cease, or knowledge shall be destroyed."<sup>11</sup> In them, as if by instruments of faith, hope, and charity, such an erudition has been erected that, holding fast to that which is perfect, they do not seek that which is only partially so<sup>12</sup>—perfect, that is, in so far as perfection is possible in this life. For in comparison with the life to come, the life of no just and holy man is perfect here. Hence "there remain," he says, "faith, hope, and charity, these three: but the greatest of these is charity."<sup>13</sup> And when anyone shall reach the eternal, two of these having fallen away, charity will remain more certain and more vigorous.

### XL

44. Therefore, when anyone knows the end of the commandments to be charity "from a pure heart, and a good conscience, and an unfeigned faith,"<sup>14</sup> and has related all of his understanding of the Divine Scriptures to these three, he may approach the treatment of these books with security. For when he says "charity" he adds "from a pure heart," so that nothing else would be loved except that which should be loved. And he joins with this "a good conscience" for the sake of hope, for he in whom there is the smallest taint of bad conscience despairs of attaining that which he believes

<sup>11</sup>[Robertson] 1 Cor. 13.8.

<sup>12</sup>[Robertson] 1 Cor. 13.10.

<sup>13</sup>[Robertson] 1 Cor. 13.13.

<sup>14</sup>[Robertson] 1 Tim. 1.5.

in and loves. Third, he says "an unfeigned faith." If our faith involves no lie, then we do not love that which is not loved, and living justly, we hope for that which will in no way deceive our hope.

With this I have said as much as I wished to say concerning faith at the present time, since in other books either by others or by myself much has already been said. Then may this be the limit to this book. In the remainder we shall discuss signs, in so far as God has granted us ability.

*from*  
Book Two

I

1. Just as I began, when I was writing about things, by warning that no one should consider them except as they are, without reference to what they signify beyond themselves, now when I am discussing signs I wish it understood that no one should consider them for what they are but rather for their value as signs which signify something else. A sign is a thing which causes us to think of something beyond the impression the thing itself makes upon the senses. Thus if we see a track, we think of the animal that made the track; if we see smoke, we know that there is a fire which causes it; if we hear the voice of a living being, we attend to the emotion it expresses; and when a trumpet sounds, a soldier should know whether it is necessary to advance or to retreat, or whether the battle demands some other response.

2. Among signs, some are natural and others are conventional. Those are natural which, without any desire or intention of signifying, make us aware of something beyond themselves, like smoke which signifies fire. It does this without any will to signify, for even when smoke appears alone, observation and memory of experience with things bring a recognition of an underlying fire. The track of a passing animal belongs to this class, and the face of one who is wrathful or sad signifies his emotion even when he does not wish to show that he is wrathful or sad, just as other emotions are signified by the expression even when we do not deliberately set out to show them. But it is not proposed here to discuss signs of this type. Since the class formed a division of my subject, I could not disregard it completely, and this notice of it will suffice.

II

3. Conventional signs are those which living creatures show to one another for the purpose of conveying, in so far

as they are able, the motion of their spirits or something which they have sensed or understood. Nor is there any other reason for signifying, or for giving signs, except for bringing forth and transferring to another mind the action of the mind in the person who makes the sign. We propose to consider and to discuss this class of signs in so far as men are concerned with it, for even signs given by God and contained in the Holy Scriptures are of this type also, since they were presented to us by the men who wrote them. Animals also have signs which they use among themselves, by means of which they indicate their appetites. For a cock who finds food makes a sign with his voice to the hen so that she runs to him. And the dove calls his mate with a cry or is called by her in turn, and there are many similar examples which may be adduced. Whether these signs, or the expression or cry of a man in pain, express the motion of the spirit without intention of signifying or are truly shown as signs is not in question here and does not pertain to our discussion, and we remove this division of the subject from this work as superfluous.

III

4. Among the signs by means of which men express their meanings to one another, some pertain to the sense of sight, more to the sense of hearing, and very few to the other senses. For when we nod, we give a sign only to the sight of the person whom we wish by that sign to make a participant in our will. Some signify many things through the motions of their hands, and actors give signs to those who understand with the motions of all their members as if narrating things to their eyes. And banners and military standards visibly indicate the will of the captains. And all of these things are like so many visible words. More signs, as I have said, pertain to the ears, and most of these consist of words. But the trumpet, the flute, and the harp make sounds which are not only pleasing but also significant, although as compared with the number of verbal signs the number of signs of this kind are few. For words have come to be predominant among men for signifying whatever the mind conceives if they wish to communicate it to anyone. However, Our Lord gave a sign with the odor of the ointment with which His feet were anointed;<sup>15</sup> and the taste of the sacrament of His body and blood signified what He wished;<sup>16</sup> and when the woman was healed by touching the hem of His garment,<sup>17</sup> something was signified. Nevertheless, a multi-

<sup>15</sup> [Robertson] John 12.3-8. For the "odor of the ointment," see 3. 12. 18.

<sup>16</sup> [Robertson] Matt. 26.28; Luke 22.19-20.

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<sup>18</sup> [Robertson] Cf. C

tude of innumerable signs by means of which men express their thoughts is made up of words. And I could express the meaning of all signs of the type here touched upon in words, but I would not be able at all to make the meanings of words clear by these signs.

#### IV

5. But because vibrations in the air soon pass away and remain no longer than they sound, signs of words have been constructed by means of letters. Thus words are shown to the eyes, not in themselves but through certain signs which stand for them. These signs could not be common to all peoples because of the sin of human dissension which arises when one people seizes the leadership for itself. A sign of this pride is that tower erected in the heavens where impious men deserved that not only their minds but also their voices should be dissonant.<sup>18</sup>

#### V

6. Thus it happened that even the Sacred Scripture, by which so many maladies of the human will are cured, was set forth in one language, but so that it could be spread conveniently through all the world it was scattered far and wide in the various languages of translators that it might be known for the salvation of peoples who desired to find in it, nothing more than the thoughts and desires of those who wrote it and through these the will of God, according to which we believe those writers spoke.

#### VI

7. But many and varied obscurities and ambiguities deceive those who read casually, understanding one thing instead of another: indeed, in certain places they do not find anything to interpret erroneously, so obscurely are certain sayings covered with a most dense mist. I do not doubt that this situation was provided by God to conquer pride by work and to combat disdain in our minds, to which those things which are easily discovered seem frequently to become worthless. For example, it may be said that there are holy and perfect men with whose lives and customs as an exemplar the Church of Christ is able to destroy all sorts of superstitions in those who come to it and to incorporate them into itself, men of good faith, true servants of God, who putting aside the burden of the world, come to the holy

laver of baptism and ascending thence, conceive through the Holy Spirit and produce the fruit of a twofold love of God and their neighbor. But why is it, I ask, that if anyone says this he delights his hearers less than if he had said the same thing in expounding that place in the *Canticle of Canticles* where it is said of the Church, as she is being praised as a beautiful woman, "Thy teeth are as flocks of sheep, that are shorn, which come up from the washing, all with twins, and there is none barren among them?"<sup>19</sup> Does one learn anything else besides that which he learns when he hears the same thought expressed in plain words without this similitude? Nevertheless, in a strange way, I contemplate the saints more pleasantly when I envisage them as the teeth of the Church cutting off men from their errors and transferring them to her body after their hardness has been softened as if by being bitten and chewed. I recognize them most pleasantly as shorn sheep having put aside the burdens of the world like so much fleece, and as ascending from the washing, which is baptism, all to create twins, which are the two precepts of love, and I see no one of them sterile of this holy fruit.

8. But why it seems sweeter to me than if no such similitude were offered in the divine books, since the thing perceived is the same, is difficult to say and is a problem for another discussion.<sup>20</sup> For the present, however, no one doubts that things are perceived more readily through similitudes and that what is sought with difficulty is discovered with more pleasure. Those who do not find what they seek directly stated labor in hunger; those who do not seek because they have what they wish at once frequently become indolent in disdain. In either of these situations indifference is an evil. Thus the Holy Spirit has magnificently and wholesomely modulated the Holy Scriptures so that the more open places present themselves to hunger and the more obscure places may deter a disdainful attitude. Hardly anything may be found in these obscure places which is not found plainly said elsewhere.

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#### VIII

12. But let us turn our attention to the third step which I have decided to treat as the Lord may direct my discourse. He will be the most expert investigator of the Holy Scriptures who has first read all of them and has some knowledge of them, at least through reading them if not through

<sup>18</sup>[Robertson] Cf. Gen. 11.1-9.

<sup>19</sup>[Robertson] Cant. (Song of Sol.) 4.2.

<sup>20</sup>Here Augustine fails to enter into speculation about the power of tropes.

understanding them. That is, he should read those that are said to be canonical. For he may read the others more securely when he has been instructed in the truth of the faith so that they may not preoccupy a weak mind nor, deceiving it with vain lies and fantasies, prejudice it with something contrary to sane understanding. In the matter of canonical Scriptures he should follow the authority of the greater number of catholic Churches, among which are those which have deserved to have apostolic seats and to receive epistles. He will observe this rule concerning canonical Scriptures, that he will prefer those accepted by all catholic Churches to those which some do not accept; among those which are not accepted by all, he should prefer those which are accepted by the largest number of important Churches to those held by a few minor Churches of less authority. If he discovers that some are maintained by the larger number of Churches, others by the Churches of weightiest authority, although this condition is not likely, he should hold them to be of equal value.

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## IX

14. In all of these books those fearing God and made meek in piety seek the will of God. And the first rule of this undertaking and labor is, as we have said, to know these books even if they are not understood, at least to read them or to memorize them, or to make them not altogether unfamiliar to us. Then those things which are put openly in them either as precepts for living or as rules for believing are to be studied more diligently and more intelligently, for the more one learns about these things the more capable of understanding he becomes. Among those things which are said

openly in Scripture are to be found all those teachings which involve faith, the mores of living, and that hope and charity which we have discussed in the previous book. Then, having become familiar with the language of the Divine Scriptures, we should turn to those obscure things which must be opened up and explained so that we may take examples from those things that are manifest to illuminate those things which are obscure, bringing principles which are certain to bear on our doubts concerning those things which are uncertain. In this undertaking memory is of great value, for if it fails rules will not be of any use.

## X

15. There are two reasons why things written are not understood: they are obscured either by unknown or by ambiguous signs. For signs are either literal or figurative. They are called literal when they are used to designate those things on account of which they were instituted; thus we say *bos* [ox] when we mean an animal of a herd because all men using the Latin language call it by that name just as we do. Figurative signs occur when that thing which we designate by a literal sign is used to signify something else; thus we say "ox" and by that syllable understand the animal which is ordinarily designated by that word, but again by that animal we understand an evangelist, as is signified in the Scripture, according to the interpretation of the Apostle, when it says, "Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> [Robertson] Deut. 25.4. For the apostolic interpretation, see 1 Cor. 9.9; 1 Tim. 5.18.

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