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# AUGUSTINIAN STUDIES

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*The 1993 Saint Augustine Lecture*

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**Augustine On Knowing What to Believe**

Gillian Evans  
*University of Cambridge*

If you will bear with me, I want to begin by setting out some ground-rules, so that we have a context in which to put Augustine's contribution to the fundamental question how we know what to believe as Christians. I shall not be talking about the place of Scripture. I take that to be fundamental and normative, as Augustine himself did.<sup>1</sup> I shall be concentrating on ideas about agreeing and convincing and winning minds, and matters of that sort, which Augustine found very interesting, and about which he had some insights which pull a modern reader up short. And I shall have something to say about the role of the Church as Augustine saw it, and its implications for us today.

The first point in this setting-in-context is that faith is both collective and individual. What it means to say "we believe" has been both a theological and a practical problem for Christianity. Believing is a matter of each individual's personal assent and commitment in response to the grace of God. As the Orthodox-Roman Catholic Statement on *Faith, Sacraments and the Unity of the Church* (Bari, 1987), puts it, "faith is inseparably both the gift of God who reveals himself and the response of the man who receives this gift."<sup>2</sup> The faith which each believer receives from God and returns to him is perhaps best described as an act of communion. But it is an act of communion which takes place in the community of the Church.

It has always been of its essence that the faith was shared by all Christians. From very early in the Church's life the baptismal profession of faith was made by the individual before the community and was af-

firmed *with* the candidate for baptism by the community. So faith is somehow an act shared with others as well as absolutely personal.

The second piece of the context is that faith also has a content. It is **about** something. When the worshipping community says *credimus*, "we believe", it goes on to make a short statement of **what** Christians believe, and to make it in terms to which all Christians always and everywhere have been able to assent.<sup>3</sup>

So we have in play an understanding of faith as an individual and shared act of trust and commitment and the recognition that it has a content of specific beliefs. If to assent to something is to agree with it, to adopt it as one's own belief, to *consent* is to do something more, to agree about something with others, to *share* a belief. Aristotle saw consent as a proof that something is true.<sup>4</sup> For the pagan geometer Euclid and the (probably) Christian Boethius alike, the conception of the common mind, the *communis animi conceptio*, is a truth attested by universal acceptance,<sup>5</sup> as something which is apparent to all reasonable minds. This operation of consent does not alter anything; it is not a creating of truth but a witness to what is already true. It is a process of recognition of a truth which already exists,<sup>6</sup> and which compels the whole community of believing minds by simply being obviously right. Augustine himself thinks that this complex consensus constitutes a form of proof. "Had you read the Gospel with care, and investigated the places where you found opposition, instead of rashly condemning them, you would have seen that the recognition of the authority of the evangelists by so many learned men all over the world, in spite of this most obvious discrepancy, **proves** that there is more in it than appears at first sight".<sup>7</sup> Consensus as a **phenomenon**, he points out, is something very surprising. That certainly proves something.<sup>8</sup>

After Augustine, Isidore in the sixth century speaks of *consentire in unum*.<sup>9</sup> Hincmar of Rheims in the ninth century sees it as a sign of the unity of the Church that there should be consent and *consonantia*.<sup>10</sup> Thomas More in the sixteenth century speaks of the authority of consent, and Erasmus thinks it wrong to dissent from the belief and consent of the Church, *sententia consensuque Ecclesiae*.<sup>11</sup> We can see this "authority of consent" as a gift of God in the Church, just like personal faith in the individual, and at the same time as a function of communication among the Christians, a living interplay, in which there is perpetual mutual correction and room for growth in understanding. (Experience shows that sharing one faith does not mean all thinking alike. There is a place for the *varietas locutionis sed unitas caritatis* of which Augustine himself speaks.)<sup>12</sup>

The nature of Christian authority is thus such that it “involves” rather than “imposing on” minds and hearts. (Even though everyone cannot be expected to judge theological technicalities, all can judge whether a doctrine, as explained in non-technical terms, corresponds with their own faith.) The notion of reception as an active welcoming rather than a passive acquiescence is adumbrated in the Middle Ages. The conception of an active “receiving” is put forward in the eleventh century by Anselm of Canterbury. In his treatise on the fall of Satan he tries to answer the question how some angels were able to persevere in righteousness while others were not. If God gave some perseverance and not others, it would seem that he condemned some to fall, and that would make him the author of evil. Anselm’s explanation is that God gave perseverance to them all, but only some accepted it; that is, it was by their own active response that they received it.<sup>13</sup>

In the sixteenth century the notion of an active collective “embracing” is clearly present. “In general councils, whatsoever is agreeable unto the written word of God we do reverently embrace”,<sup>14</sup> says the Anglican Rogers, and: “Whatsoever also is grounded upon God’s written word, though not by our common and vulgar terms to be read therein, we do reverently embrace”.<sup>15</sup> “We must not only hear and understand . . . but also with stedfast assent of mind embrace . . . , heartily love, . . . yield ourselves desirous and apt to learn, and to frame our minds to obey,”<sup>16</sup> adds Nowell, Anglican author of a Catechism. Among the reformers in Germany, Melancthon is able to define the Church as: *homines amplectentes Evangelium*,<sup>17</sup> people collectively embracing the Gospel.<sup>18</sup>

This is an idea which became central to the thinking of the first Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. “By ‘reception’ we mean the fact that the people of God acknowledge . . . a decision or statement because they recognise in it the apostolic faith. They accept it because they discern a harmony between what is proposed and the *sensus fidelium* of the whole Church”. What is being recognised is the voice of the Holy Spirit, “that through that definition, whether it was of a synod or a primate, the authentic, living voice of faith has been spoken in the Church, to the Church, by God”. It is of the essence of this recognition that it will always be consonant with Scripture. Reception is the final indication that such a decision has fulfilled the necessary conditions for it to be a true expression of the faith. But our receiving has a positive, vital effect.<sup>19</sup> It is a real “testing”.<sup>20</sup> There is a living continuous process in creative tension with that which is eternal in Christian truth.



Augustine would broadly have agreed with all this, but in his day debate had not pushed the formulations so far. Theology often develops by having to explain itself when something is challenged. The particular challenge which has sharpened understanding of reception since Augustine's day has been the need to show that Christians "know what to believe" by the very complex and collaborative process I have been sketching in outline here. It has not been, historically, just a matter of being told.

The process by which a belief or system of belief comes to be accepted by Christians so that consenting to it is inseparable from communion interested Augustine in three practical connections, as well as in its philosophical and epistemological aspects. He traced his own arrival at faith in the *Confessions*. (There he describes how he himself tried almost every religious and philosophical system of his day on the way to becoming a Christian.) He wrote several books for pastoral use, including *On Catechising the Uninstructed*, *On Faith in Things not Seen*, *On the Profit of Believing*, *On the Creed*, in which we can see what he thought about the general principles and usual processes by which people come to hold the faith for themselves individually. In his encounters with the Donatist schismatics of North Africa he wrestled with the problem of achieving common "reception" of an agreed truth or point of order, where there is dispute between divided Christian communities. All these remain very live burning issues for our own time.

As a natural psychologist Augustine found it highly congenial to explore the process of coming to faith in the individual mind, especially his own. He was very interested in his own *interior homo*. He describes how he learned language as a child. He heard sounds made by others and observed how they reacted to those sounds in their movements and gestures. In that way he learned by association (*Confessiones* I.viii). He reflects in the *Confessions* and elsewhere on the mystery of the memory and the ways in which ideas and images get into it and are taken out of it to be used; how when we talk to one another we are able to exchange these ideas and images with one another, and thus recognise within our own minds what was formerly within someone else's mind.

This is mainly about *knowing*, but it is also about "holding to be true" on some authority which works together with our own innate sense that something is so (cf. *De Utilitate Credendi* 26 and elsewhere), or own own capacity for embracing what we are shown is so. That takes place in each mind. But I have been stressing the universal Christian acceptance that the faith is not only a private thing; it is also a collective believing, and, difficult as it is to know where we are ourselves, it is even

harder to explain how and why Christians believe together with a common consent (*communis consensus*), over so many ages and in so many climates of thought.

I want to trace the points Augustine makes about all this in his autobiography in the order he makes them in the *Confessions* itself, because when he looked back this is how they seemed to him to fall into place. It is a familiar story how he read Cicero's philosophical study the *Hortensius*. (That is one of the books we have lost from the library of the ancient world, except for some quotations.) It showed Augustine the real possibilities of philosophy. He was fired with a sense of higher purpose and began to hunger for wisdom. The core of what he had found was a licence to enquire, to stretch for the highest. This seems to have been the first time that he was impressed by the content rather than the style of a book (*Confessiones* III.iv.). This appears to have been a case of recognition of something he simply needed to be told about for it to call an answering appreciation in his mind. His previous intellectual pursuits seemed trivial and unworthy, so he abandoned them. But when he tried to find the same sort of thing in the Bible the simplicity (indeed crudity) of Scripture's style got in the way of his refined rhetorician's sensibilities (*Confessiones* III.v).

Now there was some complex processing going on here. We can see the vantage-points shifting in various ways. In later years Augustine was able to discover more than he could have dreamed of in Scripture, and he came to find the philosophers less satisfactory. So we are certainly not dealing with an innate tendency of his mind to respond to one book rather than another. It was a matter of the right moment and of the development of the individual mind and soul to a point where it is capable of recognition. Now, reflects Augustine, looking back from his vantage-points as a mature Christian, "I see something in the Scriptures not revealed to the proud, not apparent to children. . . . I was not at the time the sort of person (*talis*) who could see into them" (*Confessiones* III.v). This element of timing, where maturing is required before recognition can happen, and a belief be grasped and held, proves to be an important element in Augustine's thinking about what it means to "hold" a truth of faith. That applies equally to the shared believing of the Christian community as a whole.

Augustine was driven by a hunger, which he later sees to have been for the truth. When he was young the very promise of truth could captivate him. That is what he thinks happened in the case of his entrapment by the Manichees. (It can be illuminating to make comparison with the successes of seduction of the intelligent young by modern sects.) He

took in what they taught him ravenously. But some deeper recognition of the presence of truth was missing. He knew he was not satisfied. At the same time, he believed their teaching. So he learned that believing, in the sense of *holding* to be true, can be divorced from that deeper recognition in which he was later to find fulfilment and satisfaction. Indeed, one can believe wrongly (*Confessiones* III.vi). We shall come back to this a little later.

One can also assume wrongly that someone speaks authoritatively. Augustine had expected Faustus the famous Manichee leader to be able to answer his questions. In anticipation, he had regarded him as an authority. But Faustus turned out to be a great disappointment. At the time, Augustine's change of heart was undoubtedly a result of his discovery of his own intellectual and educational superiority to this man (*Confessiones* V.vii). He allows that Faustus himself was not unaware of his shortcomings (*Confessiones* V.vii). In retrospect, Augustine sees it differently. Later he would say that his loss of respect for Faustus' authority stemmed from his perception of the intrinsic unworthiness of what he said, that is, of its inherent lack of authoritativeness (*Confessiones* V.v). Authority vanishes where it does not compel recognition.

By contrast, Augustine approves, while wondering at it, his mother's submission to the authority of bishop Ambrose when he told her not to continue in her practice of bringing little gifts to the saints' shrines where she prayed (*Confessiones* VI.ii). She had done so out of simple country piety, not considering that the roots of the practice were close to those of pagan worship. But she perceived at once the intrinsic rightness and therefore authoritativeness of what this ecclesiastical authority was telling her, and so she submitted to his judgement. Here we have an example of authority which compels recognition and thus demonstrates its authoritativeness.

One of the results of Augustine's having seen through the Manichees was a new willingness to consider the possibility that the Christian Scriptures were not so unworthy of his attention as he had thought. A blockage had been removed. There was a new vantage-point. Things could be glimpsed which could not be seen before (*Confessiones* V.xi). Augustine began to be able to appreciate the modest claims of the Scriptures as more worthy of respect than the grand claims of the Manichees (*Confessiones* VI.v). He could now come to Scripture with the conviction that neither Manichees nor Platonists, nor indeed any of the other sects he had investigated, had all the answers. Then as he read, St. Paul no longer seemed to contradict himself, and he began to recognise and consent to the truths he was reading. (*Confessiones* VII.xxi).

He also learnt in this period of personal searching and change of viewpoint that the vivid and easily grasped sensory image can crowd out the spiritual (*Confessiones* IV.xv). Only as he learned to reject images of a sensory sort as unworthy did he begin to be able to grasp that God is incorporeal (*Confessiones* VII.i). So being ripe for recognition and reception is also a matter of having a mind whose desk is cleared of distracting objects, which for Augustine tended to be bodily objects.

An element of torment of mind seems sometimes to be necessary before acceptance of some truth previously denied becomes possible. It was certainly so for Augustine, both in his wrestlings with the problem of evil (*Confessiones* VII.vii) and in his struggles before his eventual conversion against what was happening to him. A fiery thread in this torment is a burning desire to know the truth, a positive drive which keeps him seeking through the agony (*Confessiones* VIII.i). This kind of pain is classically resolved by release and acceptance. It was so for Augustine in the famous episode in the garden when his conversion took place (*Confessiones* VIII.xii).

This can all be seen as the emotional high ground in this process of shifting about of what had seemed solid underfoot, this changing of viewpoints, which makes things believable which were not so before. So first in the catalogue of what Augustine has to say about knowing what to believe comes this very personal story which is also (and Augustine knew it to be so), a paradigm of common human experience. It is, in its way, both a personal and a universal testimony to the complicated experience of coming to know what to believe.

If we turn to the second category of Augustine's writings in this area, the pastoral treatises, we get a glimpse of the ways in which Augustine thought other individuals could best be brought through the processes of recognition and reception by those with a responsibility for a teaching ministry. A deacon of Carthage had written to ask Augustine's help. He found that when he was teaching beginners in the faith he did not know how to show them exactly what beliefs make a person a Christian, what are the essentials; nor how far to elaborate them (*De catechizandis rudibus* i.1). He wanted practical guidance. He got in response the *De catechizandis rudibus*, a short course in the skills Augustine had adapted from his own rhetorical training, together with some common-sense suggestions from Augustine the experienced catechist.

The deacon admits that he has often felt disgusted with himself for his inadequate performance. Augustine reassures him that he himself never feels satisfied with what he says; it always falls short of what he had envisaged for it when he planned what he meant to say; but it is his

experience that the listener may hear it very differently and may benefit from it a great deal even so (*De catechizandis rudibus* ii.3). Here he points to a feature of the “receiving” process very familiar to him as a rhetorician, the need to put oneself in the audience’s place sufficiently to be able to shape its reactions. But he writes in a confidence that the former professor of rhetoric could not have, that the teacher is ultimately the Holy Spirit; the catechist only the instrument.

Nevertheless, he was under no illusion about the power of persuasion of a good teacher. A convert who comes for instruction only pretending to the beginnings of faith and perhaps seeking some worldly advantage can, he says, be “affected by the discourse” so that God really works in him and he becomes sincere in his search for faith. The catechist may not know when this happens, but he can encourage it by praising the good intentions the individual expresses so that their beauty becomes apparent to him and he comes to embrace them genuinely for himself (*De catechizandis rudibus* v.9). The machinery was apparent to Augustine, and he was a professional in using it. But again he sees its effectiveness as lying in God’s hands. The receiving mind is worked on by the Holy Spirit by means of the devices used by a catechist who is a good psychologist. What is at issue is the changing of minds.

If the convert comes because he is frightened by some warning, the ground is already partly prepared. There is sincere feeling in him already, even if it is negative. The catechist can reassure him that this proves that God is interested in him. He must then discourage him from expecting such special interventions, for help and proof of God’s interest, as a matter of course. The way to faith is over solid ground, through the study of the Scriptures.

Augustine recommends the narrative method, by which the truth is unfolded as a sequence of cause and effect and thus shown to follow from something the enquirer can readily accept at the outset (*De catechizandis rudibus* vi.10). This method, especially helpful for the purpose of winning people to the faith, he suggests, gives an overview of the Christian story, passing quickly over certain details so as to have time to dwell on others and give them prominence (*De catechizandis rudibus* iii.5). The catechist must tell of the events which were pointers to Christ’s coming. In that way, it will be as when Jacob was born with a hand round his twin’s ankle, so that he could be seen to follow him out of the womb. The convert will be able to see how Christ gave tokens of his coming in the patriarchs and prophets, who were a portion of his body (*De catechizandis rudibus* iii.6). The convert’s mind can be won in these ways by attracting, and so attaching him to particular points; and then unfolding

for him their implications and entailments, which he will thus be led to embrace.

This is all very well, but the prospective convert will not always be a simple person who can be won to faith by being straightforwardly told about it, however skilfully. The young Augustine's mother had no success with him in that way. Sometimes the enquirer will be a professional rhetorician himself — indeed every educated man will know something about the devices of rhetoric and will be able to identify the machinery in use for himself. He will be less likely to be affected if he sees himself played upon by familiar techniques. Often he will know about the disagreements there are among Christians and will need to have them explained to him in such a way that he himself will be able to hold the orthodox view and not be seduced into embracing the alternative.

To the first category, Augustine recommends the catechist to stress the importance of humility. He himself understood very well from his own youthful experience<sup>21</sup> the temptation the sophisticated will feel to mock the Scriptures for their apparent simplicity of style and to despise those of the Church's ministers who speak clumsily. He thinks they should be helped to experience the power of the hidden meanings of Scripture. That will be the best cure for their distaste (*De catechizandis rudibus* ix.13). The underlying process here is in fact the same as for the simple. It is to capture attention by appealing to experience and from there to lead the convert on to "receive" the consequences of what he already accepts (*De catechizandis rudibus* ix.13).

For those who have come across divisions between Christians, or have heard Jews or philosophers scoffingly disagree with Christian beliefs, the technique Augustine recommends (and here it should perhaps be borne in mind that he is considering what it is best to do for *beginners* in the faith) is to avoid trying to deal with these difficulties in detail. Instead, one should stress what must be, for the newcomer to the faith, the key point. These objections are not surprising. God knew they would be made. They were foretold. Therefore they should shake noone's faith (*De catechizandis rudibus* vii.11).

Augustine knows that the problems of winning minds are exacerbated by a sense of weariness, either in the catechist or in the listener. That can have several causes. Augustine lists them. The catechist himself has to be able to bring freshness to the telling of the same story over and over again to new catechumens. A sense of newness is not easy to maintain, class after class, as any teacher knows. An unresponsive listener makes the task of exciting him much more difficult. A stupid listener makes it necessary to leave out ideas which may interest the catechist and forces

him to keep to simplicities, and perhaps the instructor will then feel frustrated and even bored (*De catechizandis rudibus* x.14-15). We have already met the idea that the teacher may feel unsatisfied because he has not put things as elegantly or exactly as he could. Augustine chastens him for that sort of self-disgust. What matters is that the listener should understand correctly. If he fails to make his teaching clear the catechist has to learn to accept his failure patiently as God's chastening (*De catechizandis rudibus* xi.16). If the problem is sheer boredom, at having to repeat the same things so often, the trick is to unite oneself in love with the listener so closely that one hears it all newly as he does, and then one will not find it tedious and the jadedness will vanish (*De catechizandis rudibus* xii.17). Yet another source of weariness is finding the listener unmoved by what we say. The test then is to go on, to try every angle of approach (*De catechizandis rudibus* xiii.18ff).

Augustine allows for the possibility that the discourse will have to be adapted to suit different kinds of listeners. One sort of address is needed when dictating material for a future reader; another when speaking to an actual person who is present. He moves, in thinking about all this, to a point where he begins to consider problems of the winning of minds more than one at a time. It is a different matter to teach a catechumen in private from doing so with a critical audience standing round, some of whom will hold dissident opinions and are likely to comment audibly. The numbers present make a difference, as does their educational level, whether they are city people or country people (*De catechizandis rudibus* xv.23).

In all this rhetorician's talk and advice by an experienced teacher, while Augustine is subtly and sensitively exploring the inter-personal processes by which the new believer is won, he is dealing with receiving and embracing. He is also, while fully recognising the inequality between the catechist and the catechumen, describing a process of a mutual sort, in which the faith comes to be embraced by two or more minds communicating together.

So let us now turn to the third of Augustine's arenas, in which he considers the ways in which the Church as a whole comes to know what to believe. One of his starting-points again is the premiss that this involves a sharing of experience, a knowing as one knows friends. Someone asks, "Why should we believe what we cannot see?" We believe in the affection of friends, although we cannot see it, Augustine points out (*De fide rerum quae non videntur* I). Those who dispute this will say that there are proofs of such friendship. Can Augustine offer proofs of the things he wishes to be believed as matters of faith? Indeed he can, he

rejoins. Here he addresses the way in which not one single catechist but the whole Church wins minds by evidences in her own life and confession. Prophecies concerning Christ have been fulfilled. (5) He chooses at this point to allow the Church to speak, to make her case for herself. "The Church speaks to you with a mother's love," he says (5). She explains that she is the Queen of the Psalm (Psalm 45.6-17), in golden robes of wisdom, who confesses everywhere that Christ is Lord (5-6). Her witness is the witness given by things seen, to things not seen, both past and future (8). This is to rest faith on the testimony of trusted witness, and above all (for our purposes), it is to ground it upon the Church's collective witness as a community of faith.

*On the Profit of Believing (De Utilitate Credendi)* was written for a friend who had been misled by the teachings of the Manichees. Augustine identifies it in his *Retractationes* (i.14) as an early work, written while he was still a priest at Hippo. He is highly conscious in writing it that he himself had been a Manichee for nine (in fact ten) years and knows only too well the seductiveness of the sect (*De utilitate credendi* 2). In writing the *De utilitate credendi*, Augustine explores further the kinds of evidential process involved in the Church's own witness. Let us put the case, says Augustine, that someone has not as yet heard a teacher of any religion. The first thing to do is to find believers in different religions, each of whom can teach us about his or her own faith. Suppose there are people who profess a number of different religions. Should we not try first the one which holds most adherents? (*De utilitate credendi* 5) Would it not also be plausible that though only a few would attain to a full understanding and the highest practice of that religion, multitudes of simple people would agree that they were right? (*De utilitate credendi* 16) Their agreement would be a sign of the truth of the faith in question. Now there are more Christians than Jews and pagans put together, and that ought to tell us something, Augustine thinks, because their collective witness is larger (*De utilitate credendi* 19). The theology of the majority vote is dubious, but the point still has force.

Augustine also explores further in this work the links between witness and receptivity. All laws divine and human *allow* us to seek the catholic faith (*De utilitate credendi* 18). Nothing *hinders* the enquirer from looking into it. Augustine describes his own experience of the positive face of this permission, how he himself felt *driven* to search, how he heard Ambrose of Milan preach on the Old Testament (which the Manichees consider accursed), and was led to want to know more of Ambrose's solutions (*De utilitate credendi* 20). Under the influence of this witnessing, Augustine was at a certain stage willing to become a cate-



chumen, and knows that he would then have been highly receptive to a teacher and could have been won to faith by having things explained to him (*De utilitate credendi* 20).

The line of argument which stresses the importance of faith in, and response to, living witnesses is strongly continued in the *De utilitate credendi*. Augustine asks his Manichee correspondent whether people ought to believe in religion at all. It is clearly one thing to believe, another to be credulous. If the first is as blameworthy as the second it would be base to believe even one's friends, and common sense says that that is not so. Therefore there is a proper place for belief. But even if that is the case, is it not unworthy to believe before one knows? Augustine asks the Manichee to consider the position of the instructor. If he casts pearls before swine by revealing truths of faith to someone who is only pretending to a serious interest, he himself does something unworthy. So there is a two-way act of faith. The teacher has to believe the would-be catechumen to be in earnest just as the hearer has to believe his instructor (*De utilitate credendi* 23).

But surely, the Manichee objects, it would be better if you were to give me a reason? Augustine points out that not everyone will be capable of understanding the reasoning. It cannot be God's intention that only the most intelligent should be allowed to know him. More: even such a person must first believe that he will come to understanding, and must give himself up to the enquiry and submit to the rigours of a life which will purify him and render his intellect capable of grasping the truth. It will certainly be no hindrance to such a one to come as do those who simply believe, and who humbly give themselves to God in that way (*De utilitate credendi* 24).

So in coming to faith on a larger scale of numbers of believers, attitude and commitment are what breed receptiveness. The good leaders and teachers are those who have already found what they seek and are happy in it, or those who are on the way, but the right way, so that they are sure eventually to obtain what they seek. (Augustine had second thoughts about the first class in his *Retractationes*, where he pointed out that no one truly knows God and has full happiness in him in this life (*Retractationes* 1.xiv.2).) Three other kinds of people are *not* to be trusted as witnesses and teachers, because their embracing of the faith rests on insecure foundations and that affects the soundness of what they hold or causes them to fail to hold properly anything at all. There are those who hold an opinion, in other words, think they know something which they do not know. There are those who know that they do not

know, but do not seek to know. There are those who neither seek, nor care that they do not know (*De utilitate credendi* 25).

In the case of religious faith, Augustine contends, those who tell us not to believe but to trust only to reason *least* deserve to be listened to. They are too arrogant to understand the limitations of human reason (*De utilitate credendi* 27). Likewise, those who lay *claim* to be authoritative are not to be trusted, because such a one clearly lacks the humility of the one who is truly wise (*De utilitate credendi* 28).

It is time we brought all this back to the issue of the tension or dynamic between individual and shared faith I outlined at the beginning of this paper. Augustine's reflections on what modern parlance would call the inter-personal processes are gathered up in his anti-Donatist writings in connection with the concerns which were then pressing on him in the bigger arena of the faith of the whole Church. Thoughts about the processes of bringing to a common faith prompted by the Donatist debate find their way into his exegesis too. In the *Tractates* on John's Gospel Augustine asks what sort of people are they who can stumble over a mountain without noticing it? But when people deny the shared faith of the Church which is spread throughout the world they are in fact stumbling not over a small stone but indeed over a mountain (*In Ioannis evangelium* IV.iv.4).

In his treatise on marriage and desire he asks "What does it mean to have one's eyes opened?" Genesis says that after Adam and Eve had eaten the forbidden fruit, their eyes were opened (Genesis 3.6-7). Was that also true of Hagar, when she opened her eyes and saw the well (Genesis 21.17-9)? And of the disciples who walked with the Lord after his resurrection and their eyes were opened? (Luke 24.31). We do not argue that Hagar and the disciples had actually had their eyes shut, and we should not think that of Adam and Eve either. It was a matter of becoming intent on seeing and recognising what had changed for them.<sup>22</sup>

That is how it came about that people saw Jesus in his lowliness and did not recognise him, he explains in the tracts on John (*In Ioannis evangelium* IV.v.i). He paints the scene. "See..John the Baptist is standing by the river. See, the Lord comes. He has not yet been baptised. Hear what John says, 'Do you come to me? I ought to be baptised by you?'" It is clear that he already recognises the Lord, for he wants him to baptise him. After his baptism, the Lord ascends from the water; the heavens are opened, the Spirit descends. Now John recognises him. But if it is only now that he recognises him, why did he say before, "I ought to be baptised by you?"

That required a special revelation and illumination, for how else can we follow him who is invisible to us? How can we see him with our weak understanding? Here Augustine makes the Bible central. The Bible gives such instruction. It has authority and it has power to attract.<sup>23</sup>

But the passage Augustine has been discussing in John's Gospel poses a question so important that it alone, Augustine claims, could destroy the sect of Donatus (*In Ioannis evangelium* IV.xvi.1). Evidently before he baptised Jesus, John knew him in a certain way, and yet in another way he did not know him (*In Ioannis evangelium* V.ii.2). The Lord became known through the descent of the dove, not to one who did not know him, but to one who knew something about him but who also did not know something about him. So we need to ask what John already knew and what he learned through the descent of the dove (*In Ioannis evangelium* V.ii.3). John knew that Christ was the Lord. He knew that Jesus was the Truth, and that he, John, the truthful, was sent by the Truth. What he could not know was that Jesus was going to keep for himself the power to baptise and would not transmit it to any servant. Thus whether a good servant or a bad one later baptised as a minister, the person who had been baptised could be sure that he was being baptised by the Lord alone (*In Ioannis evangelium* V.viii.1). For the quality of the baptism reflects the God by whose *power* it is given, not with the quality of the human person through whose *ministry* it is given (*In Ioannis evangelium* V. vi.2). John did not know this before he baptised Jesus, but it became clear to him through the dove. That is why he said, "I knew him not" (*In Ioannis evangelium* V.viii.2). John learnt that he upon whom he would see the Spirit descending as a dove, and remaining upon him, was he who baptises with the Holy Spirit (*In Ioannis evangelium* V.ix.1). So John became acquainted with him whom he knew, but with an aspect of him which he had not before recognised (*In Ioannis evangelium* V.ii.1).

This is a particular case of a general phenomenon of not seeing what is obvious until it strikes you in the face, Augustine suggests. The Donatists, he points out, "cannot see what they do not see" (*In Ioannis evangelium* VI. v.i). "The fact is," he suggests, "it is not true that they do not see, but they close their eyes to that which hits them in the face, that is, the purpose for which the apostles were sent" (*In Ioannis evangelium* VI.v.ii). So a profound intuitive loving faithful recognition is a prerequisite for reception, and it can be blocked by spiritual blindness. It is possible for those who are Christ's in all but their denial of the unity of the Church to be suffering from a localized or partial failure to see. The whole of Tract 11 is an object-lesson to the Donatists and others on how to recognise these implications.

In Tract 12 and elsewhere Augustine explores light and darkness imagery, in connection with this business of learning to see what ought to be obvious to one. "Tobias . . . was not without eyes when, blinded in his bodily eyes, he was giving the precepts of life to his son (Tobit 2.10-11). The son was holding his father's hand that he might walk on his feet. The father was giving counsel to his son that he might keep in the way of justice. . . ." The eyes of the blind father who gives the counsel of life are better than the eyes of the seeing son who holds his hand. Jesus was also looking for such eyes when he said, "Philip, he who sees me sees also the Father (John 14.9). Those eyes are the eyes of the understanding." (*In Ioannis evangelium* XIII.3.iii). Recognition is inseparable from illumination — not only of course in Augustine, but widely in patristic authors.

The recognition and the illumination ought to bring us all to the same conclusions so that in the end we can all receive the same truth. The desirability of unanimity was not in question in the early Church. The Letter of the Synod of Constantinople (381) to the Emperor Theodosius describes how "first of all", the bishops had "renewed unity of heart each with the other". The same Council's Synodical Letter to the Bishops assembled at Rome declares that its "disposition is all for peace with unity as its sole object" and that it writes "with common consent". The Synodal Letter of the Council of Antioch in 431 had spoken of "joining together in unity of mind and concord and the spirit of peace". At Chalcedon in 451 it is intended "that all ambiguity be taken away, by the agreement and consent of all the holy fathers, and by their united exposition and doctrine". When he composed his letter on the Paschal controversy, Cummiānus, abbot of Iona (d. ?669) was able to assemble a great many patristic authorities in support of unanimity.

It was also something of a commonplace from an early date that unanimity achieves two things above all. It is the means of "cutting off every heresy", as the Synodal Letter of Nicaea in 325 puts it. At Ephesus in 431 the Synod received a letter from Pope Celestine stressing the bishops' duty to keep incorrupt "in common the faith which has come down to us today, through the apostolic succession; let us be unanimous, thinking the same thing, for this is expedient; . . . let us be in all things of one mind, or one heart, when the faith, which is one, is attacked".<sup>24</sup> Secondly, it was seen that unanimity also kept the faith alive, by preserving it in hearts and minds, by being a living communion of thought.<sup>25</sup>

So the early ideal was complete agreement of all Christians and thus of all local churches in a common faith. But, like much else in Christian

theology, it would not have needed to be so frequently argued for if it was not often under threat.

Critics have pointed in every age to the possibility that Scripture itself can be said to fail in consensus, when it appears to contradict itself or give different accounts of the same events. This is a matter to which Augustine gave considerable attention throughout his writings, and notably in his *Harmony of the Gospels*. Augustine is able to see it as providentially arranged for our good. The gospels are complementary. Matthew wrote on the royal lineage and the account of Jesus' life, as they stood in relation to the present life of men, and Mark follows him closely and looks like his attendant and epitomizer. Luke seems to follow up the priestly lineage.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Scripture makes patterns. John writes on the contemplative, the other evangelists on the active life.<sup>27</sup>

What is to be said of a state of affairs where there is no consensus, nor unanimity in faith? Severus (c. 465-538), the Monophysite Patriarch of Antioch, asked the question, "On what conditions it is right to form a union with those of the same opinions?" He argued that "it is right . . . when they are of the same opinions in everything." But he would make so strict a rule only in the case of the private individual who wants to join a church. He thinks that there has to be a degree of elasticity in the case of churches. "The complete union of the holy Churches", he thinks, "needs a lawful concession on certain points."<sup>28</sup> Because of his own position, he makes allowance here for the distinction between the act of personal commitment to Christ which makes an individual a member of his Body the Church, and the corporate act of a local church professing the faith.

Here Augustine would be both stricter and more flexible. For Augustine there was one faith in one Church, and it was only within the context of that certainty that he could contemplate the possibility of a church's being even "partly the Church". He took the view that "he who is not against us is with us"<sup>29</sup> but he did so with a particular slant. As a result of his debates against the Donatists, he came to think that heretics were severed from the Church only at those points where they were in conflict with the *consensus fidelium*. "In that in which they think with us, they are with us" (*in quo nobiscum sentiunt, in eo nobiscum sunt.*)<sup>30</sup>

There are, in Augustine's view, tests of the Church's shared faith, which may be applied in settling uncertainties. "Since the blessed Ambrose expressed himself in the passages we have quoted *in accordance with* the Catholic faith, it follows that Pelagius, with his disciple Coelestius, was justly condemned by the Catholic Church's authority for having turned aside from the true way of faith, because he did not repent of

what he had done in speaking well of Ambrose and at the same time holding views opposed to those of Ambrose".<sup>31</sup> In Manichaeus' Fundamental Epistle, Manichaeus claims that he is an "apostle of Christ". Augustine does not believe this. How would the Manichees prove it? Augustine says that for his part, he would not believe the gospel "except as moved by the authority of the Church". So when those "on whose authority" he has consented to believe in the gospel tell him not to believe in Manichaeus, he has no option but to consent to what they tell him. The Manicheans have created a paradox for themselves. If they believe what the catholic Church tells them, they do not believe Manichaeus. But if they do not believe what the catholic Church tells them, they cannot logically use the gospel authorised by that church as evidence for the truth of Manichaeus' teachings. Augustine asks whether it will not be the safest plan for him, who has put his trust in what the catholic Church has taught him, not to do what the Manichees now bid him, solely because they so instruct him, but to wait for them to make him understand in a clear and satisfactory way that they are right. But if they can find incontrovertible testimony in the Gospel that Manichaeus is an apostle, that will weaken his regard for the catholics; that will mean that he will no longer be able to believe the gospel either, because it was the catholics who gave him his faith in it. So whatever the Manichees can show from the gospel will have no weight with Augustine after that. If some passage comes to light which clearly supports Manichaeus, that will show that the catholics deceived Augustine. But on the other hand, it will not show Augustine that the Manicheans are right, for he will now not believe the gospel at all.<sup>32</sup>

This very Augustinian piece of reasoning makes a good place to stop. I have tried to show that Augustine understood very well that believing is both individual and shared, both an act of trust and commitment to the person of Christ and the receiving of a certain content as apostolic truth. That is perhaps the most ecumenically load-bearing thing Augustine believes about believing. It underlines the oneness of the Faith as by definition of the *esse* of the Church.

But he leaves a certain amount up in the air, as later generations found when they returned to the subject in periods of controversy. We are still working on knowing what to believe. But at least, since Vatican II, we are seriously trying to do it together as one Church. Augustine would have approved of that.

## Notes

1. The difficulties start when we seek to agree what Scripture means.
2. Test in *One in 2000? Towards Catholic-Orthodox Unity*, ed. Paul McPartlan (Slough, 1993), p.54.
3. That remains broadly true, even though there are now communities which deliberately avoid using any creed.
4. On the history of consent, see K. Oehler, "Der Consensus Omnium", *Antike und Abendland*, 10 (1961), 103-29. The following paragraphs are used, with some modification, in my *Authority in the Church: a challenge for Anglicans* (Norwich, 1990) pp. 91-3.
5. Boethius, *De Hebdomadibus*, ed. H.F. Stewart et al. (London, 1973), p. 40.
6. ARCIC AI E (3); cf. A II (27), *Growth*, p. 113.
7. *Contra Faustum* II.2.
8. *De Consensu Evangelistarum*, I.xxv.38.
9. *Etymologiae*, ed. W.M.Lindsay (Oxford, 1909), VI.xvi.12-3.
10. *De Praedestinatione* 38.1, PL 125.419.
11. More, *Responsio, Complete Works*, ed. J.M.Headley (London/Yale 1963), V.198.27; Erasmus, *Epistolae*, ed. P. S. Allen et al. (Oxford 1906-58) 6. 206.
12. *Epistula* 36.22 and see the newly discovered sermons, *Revue des Etudes Augustiennes* 37 (1991), p.43.31.
13. Anselm, *De Casu Diaboli* 2-3, *Opera Omnia*, ed. F.S.Schmitt (Rome/Edinburgh, 1938-68), 1.235.
14. Rogers, Parker Society edition pp. 210-11.
15. Rogers, p. 201.
16. Alexander Nowell, *Catechism*, ed. G.E.Corrie (Cambridge, 1853), p.117.
17. *Corpus Reformatorum*, 24.401, cf. 406 and 409.
18. In the same spirit the Church of England's Thirty-Nine Articles urge that the Creeds "ought thoroughly to be received and believed".
19. ARCIC AI E (3), and H. Chadwick, General Synod of the Church of England, *Report of Proceedings* (February, 1985) 16.1, p. 75.
20. Cf. *Articuli Cleri*, 1558, *recepta et probata*, Cardwell, *Synodalia*, II, p. 492.
21. *Confessiones*, III.5.
22. *Ne nuptiis et concupiscentia* I.v.6.
23. *De Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae* I.vii.11.
24. Labbe, *Concilia*, III.613.
25. Ehwald, p.481, *Prose Works of Aldhelm*, tr. M. Lapdige and M. Herren (Ipswich, 1979), p.155.

26. *De Consensu Evangelistarum* I.ii.4.
27. *De Consensu Evangelistarum* I.v.8.
28. *Select letters of Severus*, ed. and tr. E.W.Brooks (London, 1903), Vol.II,p.15, I.2.
29. See my article "Partly the Church: some ecumenical implications", *Midstream* 31 (1992) 326-339.
30. *De Baptismo contra Donatistas* I.i.2.
31. *De peccato originali contra Pelagium et Coelestium* II.xli.48.
32. Reply to Manichaeus' Fundamental Epistle, v.6.