

# Clerical Misconduct, Charity, and the Common Good: Saint Augustine's Sermons 355 & 356

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## Introduction

Anyone who believes that clerical scandals are unique to recent decades need look no further than Saint Augustine's late-fourth and early-fifth century sermons and letters to refute that opinion. Although the precise details of clerical misconduct incidents vary depending upon historical and cultural contexts, the basic, underlying issues and impact upon the community do not. This article assesses and analyzes Augustine's public commentary on the topic of clerical scandal as recorded in Sermons 355 and 356. I argue that the principles guiding this discourse at the end of Augustine's life are the very same principles that defined his pastoral vocation as a young priest very recently and quite reluctantly ordained,<sup>1</sup> and as the founder of multiple monastic communities. Specifically, I contend that concern for promoting charity and the common good are the two primary principles at work in Augustine's public handling of an incident of clerical misconduct involving one of his priests.

First, the notion of the common good, or the salvation of the many, is epitomized in a brief, urgent letter Augustine addressed to the bishop who ordained him in 391. There, Augustine asks Valerius, "But how am I to exercise this ministry for the salvation of others, *not seeking what is beneficial for me, but for the many, that they may be saved* (1 Cor. 10:33)?"<sup>2</sup> Second, the primacy of charity is a theme woven throughout Augustine's sermons and writings, and is the basis of both his monastic rule and his approach to Church discipline. Without grasping how Augustine understood voluntary poverty as an expression of fraternal charity and Christ-like humility, and hypocrisy as a serious deficiency of those virtues, it

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<sup>1</sup> As Frederic Van der Meer explains, shortly before his ordination, Augustine was contentedly living the life of a country ascetic within a community of likeminded friends. During a Sunday liturgy in Hippo one day, Bishop Valerius announced his intention to choose a new priest, and Augustine was "firmly seized and led to the *exedra*, where Valerius sat." That is, "Augustine, like many another at this time, was literally dragged to the priest's bench." *Augustine the Bishop*, trans. Brian Battershaw and G.R. Lamb, (London; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961): 4.

<sup>2</sup> Saint Augustine, "Letter 21: Augustine to Valerius," in *Letters 1-99*, Vol. II/1, trans. Roland Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2001): 57 (§4). "Sed hoc ipsum quo modo ministrem ad salutem aliorum 'non quaerens, quod mihi utile est, sed quod multis, ut salui fiant'?"

may be difficult for a contemporary reader to understand why the issue of Januarius and his last will and testament would have been so damaging to the Christian community.

Therefore, I use the principles of charity and the common good as interpretive keys by which to understand Augustine's public handling of clerical scandal that disturbed not only his monastic community, but also his ecclesial community. Beginning with a discussion of historical context, I then proceed to the texts themselves, paying attention to the rhetor and audience, and the structure and arguments of the sermons. I conclude with an interpretation of the various aspects that comprise Augustine's discourse, and the ways in which he attempts to heal the harm Januarius's actions inflicted upon his family, community, and Church.

**“Nothing...is more difficult...than the office of a bishop, priest, or deacon.”**  
**–Letter 21<sup>3</sup>**

A brief, urgent letter Augustine addressed to Bishop Valerius of Hippo in 391 provides insight into his views of the clergy both before and after his own ordination, and captures succinctly the concern for the salvation of the many characterizing his entire pastoral career. In the letter, Augustine confesses that before becoming a priest, he criticized the mistakes of clerics, and imagined that he might correct them. However, Augustine wanted no part of ordained ministry for himself. “I judged this ministry to be filled with perils,” he tells Valerius.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, his unwilling induction to the ranks of the clergy painfully highlights his own unpreparedness for the task of ministry. Augustine laments that, “the second post at the helm was handed to me who did not yet know how to hold an oar.”<sup>5</sup> His newfound understanding of his own lack of knowledge and preparation “torments and crushes” him.<sup>6</sup> Augustine now realizes “what a man needs who ministers to the people the sacrament and word of God,”<sup>7</sup> and he does not believe that he yet possesses those necessary attributes. He begs Valerius for a brief sabbatical, and explains that his plan is to prepare himself further by a study of the scriptures. He writes, “by the knowledge and grasp of [the scriptures] a man of God can minister to the more ordinary affairs of the Church or at least live with a sounder conscience among the bands of the wicked or die so that he does not lose that one life for which humble and gentle Christian hearts sigh. But how is this possible except as the Lord himself said: By seeking, by asking, and by knocking?

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 56 (§1).

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, “Letter 21,” 56 (§2).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. §1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 57 (§3).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

That is, by praying, by reading, and by weeping.”<sup>8</sup> Augustine desires to return from his retreat with “fruit for the Church of Christ and for the benefit of my brothers and fellow servants,” and “instructed in the most salutary counsels of [Christ’s] scriptures.”<sup>9</sup>

What are we to make of Augustine’s emphatic, emotionally charged pleas to Valerius? Recent scholarship contends that, “heavily psychologized portraits misread Letter 21.”<sup>10</sup> Michael Cameron suggests that, “we take Augustine’s tone to refer not to his personal spiritual malady but to an unspecified emotional wound (*vulnus*) that he sustained during his first foray into ministry....Overconfidence in knowledge caused him to suffer a grievous wound in battle.”<sup>11</sup> Along similar but even more specific lines, Allan Fitzgerald argues that it was encounters with Donatist leaders that motivated Augustine’s appeal to Valerius, explaining, “The issue is, once again, clear: he is not worried about his salvation, but about serving others. So, he seeks some time apart, that is, he wants a ‘retreat,’ not a dispensation.”<sup>12</sup>

To summarize, the reasons why Augustine wrote Letter 21 do not arise from self-interested or “self-referential”<sup>13</sup> factors, such as a man in the throes of a “vocation crisis,”<sup>14</sup> or even a mid-life crisis precipitated by the recent deaths of his son and a close friend.<sup>15</sup> Although Augustine undoubtedly experienced some personal sense of loss at the end of his tranquil, simple existence in a community “deep in the heart of the country,”<sup>16</sup> the pressing concern so evident in Letter 21 seems to be more than mere resentment over his forcible ordination and subsequent thrust into active ministry. And, whether Augustine’s reasons for writing the epistle were the result of interior or external turmoil (or some combination of the two factors), he is clearly struck by, and one might very accurately say “wounded” by,<sup>17</sup> the immense responsibility he feels for the benefit and salvation of Christ’s Church. That notion of accountability, together with his sense of inadequacy for the task of guiding souls to salvation, “was the reason for those tears.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 57 (§4).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 58 (§6).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Cameron, “Valerius of Hippo: A Profile,” in *Augustinian Studies* 40 (2009): 16.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Allan Fitzgerald, O.S.A., “When Augustine Was Priest,” in *Augustinian Studies* 40 (2009): 45.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Cameron, “Valerius of Hippo,” 15.

<sup>16</sup> Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Saint Augustine, “Letter 21,” 56. (§2)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

**“Before all else, dearest brothers, God should be loved, and then your neighbor.” –The Rule of Saint Augustine<sup>19</sup>**

Throughout his life, Augustine valued highly the experience of close friendships, and even flirted with the notion of community life and voluntary poverty before his conversion experience in the summer of 386. In his *Confessions*, he recounts how he and his companions dreamed of a pleasant life devoted to the study of philosophy. He writes:

We would set up this place of leisurely retirement in such a way that any possessions we might have would be made available to the community and we would pool our resources in a single fund. The sincerity of our friendship should ensure that this thing should not belong to one person and that to another: there would be one single property formed out of many; the whole would belong to each of us, and all things would belong to all.<sup>20</sup>

After his return to the Catholic faith of his boyhood, Maria Boulding says, “Initially at Cassiciacum, and again at Thagaste and Hippo after their return to Africa, Augustine and his friends found within their faith a communion of hearts and minds and life which was like a microcosm of the Church.”<sup>21</sup> Likewise, Luc Verheijen explains, “Saint Augustine was to realize more and more that brotherhood in a monastery is a concrete expression of the brotherly spirit of the whole Church: the ‘one soul’ is at rock-bottom ‘the soul of Christ which is one,’ the *anima unica Christi*.”<sup>22</sup> However, it must be noted that this vision was the product of decades of development in Augustine’s understanding of the monastic life.

Adolar Zumkeller’s account of Augustine’s ideal of the religious life traces its maturation over the course of his life and ministry. Augustine’s first experience of an intentional Christian community was after his conversion when, as a catechumen awaiting baptism, he shared “the weeks of recovery and reflection” at Cassiciacum with his dear friend, Alypius, his mother, Monica, his son, Adeodatus,

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<sup>19</sup> Augustine, “The Rule of St. Augustine,” in *Augustine’s Ideal of the Religious Life*, by Adolar Zumkeller, O.S.A. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986): 287.

<sup>20</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B. (Hyde Park: New City Press, 1997): VI, 14, 24.

<sup>21</sup> Maria Boulding, O.S.B., “Introduction,” in *The Confessions*, 27.

<sup>22</sup> Luc Verheijen, *Saint Augustine’s Monasticism in Light of Acts 4:32-35*, (Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 1979): 80.

and several other relatives and close friends.<sup>23</sup> “Certainly,” Zumkeller remarks, “the circle of friends at Cassiciacum was not yet a monastic community, but the groundwork had been laid for the new way of life which was to be established at Tagaste and Hippo.”<sup>24</sup>

Augustine gained further exposure to monasticism during trips to Milan and Rome, and established his own monastery on the grounds of his father’s estate in Thagaste in 388. Inspired by the conversion story of Saint Antony of Egypt, Augustine “completely renounced all his personal possessions when he began their common life in Tagaste.”<sup>25</sup> After his ordination in Hippo in 391, Valerius gave him a garden on the Church grounds for a monastery. Zumkeller explains, “Augustine felt the tension between the priesthood and the monastic life to be great, and yet his determination to unite the one with the other was strong from the very beginning.”<sup>26</sup> Complete renunciation of material goods was a prerequisite for entrance, with Augustine grounding his insistence upon voluntary poverty in Acts 4:32.<sup>27</sup> He composed a religious rule around 400, which reiterates the expression of unity and charity through common life. “From now on, this is what Augustine holds up before his brothers as the essential element of their monastic common life,” Zumkeller states, “they should hold earthly goods in common and possess one heart and one soul directed to God.”<sup>28</sup> Or, as Verheijen comments, “Unity of souls and hearts is greatly furthered when one puts in common all material belongings.”<sup>29</sup> Clerics joined this community, but were outnumbered by the lay brothers who “gave their stamp to the entire community.”<sup>30</sup>

After Augustine was selected coadjutor bishop of Hippo in 395, and succeeded Valerius as bishop in 396, he was faced with fresh challenges to his community vision. The day-to-day cares of pastoral ministry and administrative tasks, however, did not sap his determination “to continue his own monastic life.”<sup>31</sup> Realizing that, as bishop, he could not be inhospitable toward the members of his Church, but neither could he disturb the peace of the garden monastery by receiving a steady stream of visitors, Augustine “gathered around him in the ‘house

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<sup>23</sup> Adolar Zumkeller, O.S.A., *Augustine’s Ideal of the Religious Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986): 9.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>27</sup> “The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common.” (New American Bible)

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>29</sup> Verheijen, 4.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

of the bishop' (*domus episcopi*) clerics who were prepared to join him in a common life of voluntary poverty according to the example of the Apostolic Church."<sup>32</sup> This new monastic establishment would also function as a sort of diocesan seminary. Therefore, the contemporary distinction between priests belonging to a religious order and those "secular" clergy serving a diocese does not appear in this scenario. Van der Meer writes, "In Augustine's view [ascetic community life] was even more suited to the clergy than to anybody else."<sup>33</sup> Just as in the garden monastery, "admission was preceded by a final renunciation of money and goods...In the community of clerics, social differences were unimportant. What mattered was not how much money or land someone had brought into the monastery with him, but only the measure of his love for God and the brethren."<sup>34</sup>

As Zumkeller relates, Augustine understood monastic profession as an experience of conversion, of laying aside "that image (*imago*) of the earthly Adam...in order to carry the image of the second Adam who had come down from heaven."<sup>35</sup> Conversion is characterized by a renunciation of the love of the world (*amor mundi*). "When man...turns to God, to himself, or to his neighbor, it is love (*caritas*) that is driving him, a well-ordered love (*ordinata dilectio*), a love of God (*amor Dei*). But when he is striving for delight in his own self, in his fellow-men, or in material possessions...then cupidity (*cupidas*), the sinful love of the world (*amor mundi*), is ruling him."<sup>36</sup> This Christ-like *caritas* is impossible without Christ-like *humilitas*—a kenotic humility that voluntarily becomes poor for the redemption of humanity.<sup>37</sup> Augustine "never wearied in presenting Christ as the teacher of humility. Christ had made this virtue known by word and example; he had called man to imitate His humility, so that it might also become the way to glory."<sup>38</sup> Put simply: what human being can remain willfully proud after comprehending the profound humility of God?<sup>39</sup>

This historical context has, I hope, provided a clearer understanding of why voluntary poverty was so central to Augustine's rule for religious life, and why, as I will explain next, refusal to completely renounce one's personal wealth and thus fulfill the monastic vow was such a source of grief for the bishop and scandal for

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Van der Meer, 200.

<sup>34</sup> Van der Meer, 41.

<sup>35</sup> Zumkeller, 210.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 234-35.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Sermon 142, especially Augustine's incredulous exclamation, "God is now humble, and we human beings are still proud!" (§6)

the Christian community. The practice of poverty must be understood as an expression of love of God as expressed through love of neighbor, in imitation of Christ. Fraternal charity is intimately related to the virtue of humility, which renders insignificant the economic and social differences that would have distinguished the monks from one another before they entered the monastery. Failure to embrace the religious vow of poverty is a means of retaining secular power and position, contrary to the example of Christ, who freely laid aside all that was rightly his for the salvation of many. If we do not understand *caritas* as the principle motivating Augustine's firm insistence upon total renunciation of all private property, and Christ as the exemplar of voluntary poverty for the salvation of the many, Augustine's monastic rule and practices will look like empty asceticism. It is love that animates the actions.

**“We live here with you, and we live here for you; and my intention and wish is that we may live with you in Christ's presence forever.” –Sermon 355<sup>40</sup>**

Nearly 34 years have passed since Augustine addressed his tearful correspondence to Valerius. The date is just before or after Christmas of 425, the location is the Basilica of Peace at Hippo, the rhetor is a 71-year-old Augustine, and the audience is an unusually large gathering of listeners who have shown up at their bishop's request.<sup>41</sup> The day before, he had promised to explain an important matter to them in greater detail. The issue to be addressed is that of scandal within Augustine's own monastic community. He speaks to the congregation while sitting; they stand for his remarks. Mindful of these circumstances, he promises not to talk at great length and weary them. Augustine begins the discourse by recounting the circumstances under which he assumed leadership of the Church in Hippo. He came to the city as a young man, seeking to establish a monastic community. “I had in fact left behind all worldly hopes, and I did not wish to be what I could have been; nor, however, was I seeking to be what I am now,” he tells the audience.<sup>42</sup> “I did everything I could to assure my salvation in a lowly position, and not to incur the grave risks of a high one.” Augustine explains, “I was caught, I was made a priest, and by this grade I eventually came to the episcopate.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Augustine, “Sermon 355: First Sermon on the Way of Life of His Clergy,” in *Sermons, (341-400) on Various Subjects*, Vol. III/10, trans. by Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995): 166 (§1).

<sup>41</sup> George Lawless, “Failure to Fulfill a Vow and an Inventory of Clerical Conduct.” Unpublished manuscript chapter (Microsoft Word document): 1.

<sup>42</sup> Augustine, “Sermon 355,” 167 (§2).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Even after surrendering to the priestly vocation he tried so ardently to avoid, Augustine moved forward with his plans to establish a monastery. He received a plot of land from Valerius, and gathered together men who unanimously agreed to distribute their property to the poor and share everything in common. No one would possess any private property. Augustine tells the audience that he treated his religious brothers respectfully. He was inclined to believe the best about them, and not to investigate whether or not they had truly renounced all of their personal material goods. However, when the scandalous actions of one of his priests, Januarius, came to light, Augustine was compelled to publicly address the accusations.

In short, Januarius, who was a priest well known to the Church of Hippo, claimed to have dispensed his private wealth to the poor, but was instead “administering money for a daughter who was a minor and who was living in a convent close by.”<sup>44</sup> When he was confronted with the imminence of his own death, he disinherited his daughter and son (who was also a monk) and left his money to the Church in a will.<sup>45</sup> His bishop was left with a difficult problem, and a dilemma concerning how it ought to be addressed.

Augustine acknowledges that his eventual decisions in the matter cannot please everyone. At the time of his remarks, he has already decided to refuse Januarius’ legacy willed to the Church, and he knows that some members of the audience will be displeased with his choice. He defends himself, stating, “Let those who wish praise me, those who don't want to praise me, at least spare me....Anyone who wants to make the Church his heir after disinheriting his son, should look for someone else to accept the legacy, not Augustine.”<sup>46</sup>

Augustine then makes a rather startling announcement. He has decided to change his policy of not ordaining or retaining as ministers those who do not live according to the monastic rule of voluntary poverty. He explains:

those who wish to keep some private property, for whom God and the Church are not enough, may stay where they like and where they can; I will not deprive them of their clerical status. I don't want to have any hypocrites. It's bad—who would deny it?—it's bad to fall away from one's commitment; but it's worse to pretend to have such a commitment....I know how men love the clerical state; I won't deprive anyone of it who doesn't want to live in community with me. Those who wish to live with me have God. If they are prepared to be provided for by God through his Church, not

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<sup>44</sup> Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, 201.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Augustine, “Sermon 355,” 170 (§5).



to have any private property, but either to distribute it to the poor or put it in the common fund, let them stay with me. Those who don't want this may consider themselves free; but they should also consider whether they can have eternal felicity.<sup>47</sup>

Augustine concludes his address with a promise to his audience that he will update them on the issue by Epiphany, and will not conceal how he resolves the matter between Januarius' two children. He implores his people, "Pray for me, that as long as there is a soul in this body, and any kind of strength supplied to it, I may serve you in preaching the word of God."<sup>48</sup>

**"We are always before your eyes. We desire nothing of anyone, other than your good works." –Sermon 356<sup>49</sup>**

It is just after Epiphany of 426 when the assembly gathers again to hear Augustine's report of the matter involving Januarius, and an update on the bishop's own clergy and their way of life. He begins by saying, "Your graces are owed a sermon today about us clergy ourselves,"<sup>50</sup> then asks them to listen carefully as the deacon Lazarus reads Acts 4:31-35.<sup>51</sup> After finishing the proclamation, he hands Augustine the book, and Augustine re-reads aloud the passage himself, explaining, "I too want to read. It gives me more pleasure, you see, to be reading these words than to be arguing my case with my own words."<sup>52</sup> Then, Augustine briefly recapitulates the topics of the earlier sermon, and defends his reasons for speaking about it publicly.

He tells his flock that he has good news for them, and proceeds to give a thorough account of the results of his investigation into his clergy's affairs. All of

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 170-71 (§6).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 171 (§7).

<sup>49</sup> Augustine, "Sermon 356: Saint Augustine's Second Sermon on the Way of Life of the Clergy Who Were Living with Him," in *Sermons, (341-400) on Various Subjects*, Vol. III/10, trans. by Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1995): 178 (§12).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 175 (§1).

<sup>51</sup> "When they had prayed, the place where they were gathered was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak the word of God with confidence to everyone who wished to believe. Now the multitude of believers had one soul and heart, and they none of them said that what they possessed was their own, but they had all things in common. And the apostles were testifying with great power to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus; and great grace was upon them all. Nor was there anyone in need among them. For as many of them as owned estates or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds from them and laid them at the feet of the apostles; while distribution was made to each as each had need" (p. 174-75, §1).

<sup>52</sup> Augustine, "Sermon 356," 175 (§1).

the brothers — priests, deacons, and subdeacons — are in full compliance with their vow to share all things in common. No one retains any private property, with the exception of a few brothers whose legal situations prevent the total and immediate relinquishment of their properties (e.g., Augustine's own nephew, Patrick, was unable to dispose of his property until he came of age and the deed could be legally ratified). However, these brothers are already practicing the spirit of the monastic vow of poverty, and are eager to officially relinquish their material goods as soon as legally or otherwise possible.

In the interest of full disclosure and transparency, Augustine gives a short synopsis of each brother's situation, and informs the audience that the dispute between Januarius' two children has been satisfactorily resolved, with each agreeing to share the inheritance equally.<sup>53</sup> Augustine wraps up his homily with an acknowledgement that his words are sure to spark conversations, stating, "And if it's such that we need yet again to clear ourselves, I will answer the slanderers, I will answer the adverse critics, I will answer the skeptics, those who don't trust us, their leaders; I will answer them as best I can, and as the Lord enables me to."<sup>54</sup> He will even go so far as to respond to slander, because, in his words, "I want our life to be lived openly before your eyes."<sup>55</sup>

Finally, Augustine promises swift and definitive discipline of any clergyman who lives a hypocritical life by claiming to have renounced his goods, but continuing to retain and administer them secretly. Such a brother will be removed from both the monastery and the ministry immediately. In his previous address, Augustine had announced the surprising change of policy permitting his clergy to openly own property and remain in ministry, although not remaining in the monastery. He does not retract that promise, despite expressing disappointment over such a choice.<sup>56</sup> What Augustine will not tolerate are hypocrisy and lies. "Let him appeal against me to a thousand councils, let him sail overseas against me wherever he likes, certainly wherever he can," he says fervently, "so help me God, wherever I am bishop, that man cannot be a clergyman."<sup>57</sup>

The reason for everything—the changes in policy, the investigations, the public addresses—is summarized in the closing line of Sermon 356. With eloquent simplicity, Augustine says, "We don't want, though, to have a great [heavenly] reward at your expense. Let us have a smaller reward there, and still reign there together with you in the kingdom."<sup>58</sup> The goal is same as it has always been for

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 179 (§11).

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 180 (§12).

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> He does not indicate that any brother actually took advantage of the new policy.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 181 (§14).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 182 (§15).

Augustine throughout the decades spanning his pastoral career. The journey to Christ and by Christ is not a solitary one. The members of Christ's Body travel together, as a community, to the heavenly Jerusalem.

**“Sit ejus quasi copia dicendi’ forma vivendi.” –De Doctrina Christiana<sup>59</sup>**

Recent scholarship focusing upon Sermons 355 and 356 is not particularly abundant. One exception is an article by Conrad Leyser in which he argues, “the scandal was something of a set-up, an orchestrated media event. It gave Augustine the opportunity to begin staging the transfer of immediate juridical power to his successor and to turn to the longer term management of his literary estate.”<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, “Augustine wished now to present himself as a poor man who had chosen and maintained a life of apostolic poverty, be it as monk or a priest.”<sup>61</sup> While not discounting the value of Leyser's investigation into the social-historical context of Augustine's own narrative construction of his “retrospective self,”<sup>62</sup> I must admit that I find Leyser's account to be an unsatisfactory explanation of the sermons.<sup>63</sup> My earlier contextual discussion supports the notion that Augustine's treatment of clerical misconduct and subsequent scandal ought to be considered in light of his expressed understanding of the vocation of a cleric, and in light of the Christ-like virtues of love and humility that motivate him to insist upon the sharing of material goods in monastic life. Therefore, when approaching these sermons, it is necessary to think about the ways in which Januarius' actions are a breach of charity, and how Augustine's words are an attempt to repair the harm done to Januarius' family, his monastic community, and the Church at Hippo.

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<sup>59</sup> Qtd. in Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, 411. “Eloquent is the man whose life can speak.”

<sup>60</sup> Conrad Leyser, “*Homo pauper, de pauperibus natus*: Augustine, Church Property, and the Cult of Stephen,” in *Augustinian Studies* 36 (2005): 230

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 232.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>63</sup> I make this statement as a novice student of Augustine, yet with the conviction that whatever dimension one chooses to explore in his thought, one must always proceed with an awareness of the Christological center of his preaching, and his ever-present concern with the Christ-like virtues of *caritas* and *humilitas*. I understand that, although he assumed the administrative duties of a cleric and bishop with reluctance, he was, at this point in his life, by no means a naïve amateur unaware of the various “secular” concerns related to his Church and monasteries. Therefore, it is certainly appropriate to raise questions about what “practical” motivations inspired Augustine to publicly confront a clerical scandal, and what sort of rhetorical exigencies he wished to modify with his speech. However, I contend that any speculation about Augustine's rhetorical performance of his “retrospective self” cannot be divorced from a theologically informed interpretation of his discourse.

At the most micro level, Januarius' actions have brought disunity to his own family. In his deathbed will, he disowned both of his children and left the inheritance to the Church, praising his daughter, and, in a clause of the will, rebuking his son. To make matters worse, both children are members of religious communities, and have now been subjected to the scandalous example of their own father, who violated his monastic vow of poverty. Grieved by these actions, Augustine tells his congregation that Januarius:

has left his children an occasion for a quarrel which troubles me greatly. The girl says, "It's mine, you know that my father always said that." The boy says, "My father should be believed, because he couldn't possibly lie when he was dying." And what a really bad thing this wrangling is! But if these children are both servants of God, we can quickly put an end to this dispute between them. I will listen to them as a father, and perhaps better than their own father. I will see what the rights of the matter are, as God wills, together with a few of the faithful and respected brethren taken, by God's favor, from among your number, that is from this congregation. I will hear the case between them, and as the Lord grants us, I will settle it.<sup>64</sup>

Sensing that some members of the audience will be displeased because he refuses to accept Januarius' gift to the Church, Augustine anticipates their accusation that he stubbornly refuses to accept offerings to the Church, and counters, "I assure you I accept good offerings, holy offerings. But if anyone is angry with his son, and disinherits him on his deathbed, if he lived, wouldn't I try to placate him? Wouldn't I have the duty to reconcile him with his son?...But certainly, if he does what I have often urged people to do—he has one child, let him think of Christ as the second; he has two, let him think of Christ as the third; he has ten, let him make Christ the eleventh, and I will accept it."<sup>65</sup> This is a remarkable statement from a bishop whose theology and preaching revolve around the supremacy and centrality of Christ! He has what some would consider the audacity to proclaim that it is better to provide for one's family and promote charity and peace between one's children than to disinherit them in order to give the money to the Church. Such a gift is tainted, "bitter fruit,"<sup>66</sup> not a pleasing, acceptable sacrifice to God. He concludes, "Certainly, when I have granted a son what his father, dying in anger, took away from him, I have done well."<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Augustine, "Sermon 355," 168 (§3).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 169 (§4).

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 168 (§3).

<sup>67</sup> Augustine, "Sermon 355," 170 (§5).

Januarius' selfish actions also reveal a severe lack of love toward his religious community. As I have already discussed in some detail, voluntary poverty in Augustine's thought is linked to charity and humility, both of which are demonstrated most perfectly in the self-emptying incarnation and passion of Christ. Augustinian poverty is, as Zumkeller writes, "a way to realize the consummate community of love in the monastic life.... Possession and ownership, [Augustine] said in a sermon, have always been at the root of all contention and warfare. In contrast, freely willed poverty as the primitive Christian community understood it was the source of peace and harmony.... In monastic poverty and common ownership he was henceforth to see a practical expression and an efficacious sign of spiritual love (*caritas*)."<sup>68</sup> Januarius' misconduct is particularly damaging to his community when we consider his assets not merely as money or property, but as the means to retain some sense of power, autonomy, and control over his individual destiny and welfare. Januarius loves his brothers in religion too little, and the independence represented by his wealth too much. Even further, he has provided weapons to the community's detractors, who will now query, "Do they really live in the way you say they do?... Wasn't there recently a priest with a position in their community who made a will, and disposed of what he possessed as he wished, and left it as a legacy? Do they really have everything in common there? Does nobody really call anything his own?"<sup>69</sup>

Finally, Januarius' misconduct demonstrates an absence of charity toward his ecclesial community. We do not know exactly how the Church at Hippo first heard about the scandal of the last will and testament of one of their priests. However, we do know that the Catholic community would have had frequent and familiar interactions with the clergy of the monastery. This was not a cloistered community. As Charles W. Brockwell, Jr. says, "Augustine's priests did not live sealed off from the Catholics of Hippo."<sup>70</sup> Augustine's African society "was endemically turbulent and frequently violent,"<sup>71</sup> and Augustine "could not help seeing that the Church's considerable wealth was a constant source of envious calumnies uttered by the laity against bishops and clergy."<sup>72</sup> Januarius has forgotten that, as a priest, he "dispenses Christ's word and sacraments to Christ's people, feeding and nourishing them in Christian life. The Word and sacraments the ordained minister dispenses are not his but Christ's. Since Christ himself is the model and pattern of true humility, the ordained minister who dispenses Christ's

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<sup>68</sup> Zumkeller, 148-49.

<sup>69</sup> Augustine, "Sermon 356," 175 (§2).

<sup>70</sup> Charles W. Brockwell, Jr., "Augustine's Ideal of Monastic Community: A Paradigm for His Doctrine of the Church," *Augustinian Studies* 8 (1977): 106.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 107-08.

<sup>72</sup> Zumkeller, 153.

Word and sacraments to the people of God must also be a man of great humility.”<sup>73</sup> A minister who has fully embraced voluntary poverty is making a profound statement about the relative value he assigns to the Word and sacraments. By giving up the right to administer his own goods, he is granted the privilege of distributing the priceless treasures of the Church to Christ’s Body. Such a minister models properly ordered loves—valuing the eternal above everything temporal, and using all things for the edification of his neighbor and the salvation of the many. I argue that, contrary to the example of Januarius, Augustine’s handling of this scandalous situation models the humility, love and concern for the common good characterizing a faithful minister.

One of the clearest examples of the principle of “what benefits the salvation of the many” is found in Augustine’s distinction between conscience and reputation. Although one might be able to choose certain actions based upon a clear conscience, she should also be aware of the impact such actions might have upon her brothers and sisters. An individual owes her conscience solely to God, but ought also to be concerned with her reputation as it relates to the salvation of her neighbor.<sup>74</sup> “Those who, being clear in their consciences, neglect their reputations, are being cruel,” Augustine argues.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, those who are in positions of great influence, especially the clergy, ought to be even more careful to use their reputations for the benefit of those whom they shepherd.<sup>76</sup>

According to Augustine, clergy must be willing to submit to an intense form of scrutiny, and to embrace even more transparency than is required of the average member of the Christian community. The lives and affairs of clergy must be above reproach, evidently virtuous, and worthy of emulation. However, Augustine is realistic. When he permits his brothers to leave the monastery but remain clerics, he makes a concession to human weakness, although it obviously pains him to do so. What is entirely intolerable for Augustine is the damage wreaked by hypocrisy and dishonesty, such as when a cleric pretends to live in voluntary poverty while secretly managing his personal finances. When such scandal (or even potential for scandal) breaks into the public awareness, Church leaders must be willing to address the issues with honesty and forthrightness. As noted earlier, in Sermon 356, Augustine promises that he will respond to everyone, even the skeptics, slanderers, and critics. Most importantly, he will communicate with those who lack trust in their leaders. Augustine’s sacrificial love for the souls entrusted to him

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<sup>73</sup> Lee F. Bacchi, *The Theology of Ordained Ministry in the Letters of Augustine of Hippo* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1998):122-23.

<sup>74</sup> It seems evident that Augustine was influenced by Saint Paul’s treatment of this topic in Romans 14.

<sup>75</sup> Augustine, “Sermon 355,” 166 (§1).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

compels him to go beyond smug satisfaction over being “right,” and into the humbling, difficult work of reconciling the critics, skeptics, slanderers and suspicious members of the Church to the community.

Augustine also serves the members of his Church by publicly stating his policies and expectations, which permits his audience to hold him accountable to his promises. He explains carefully and thoroughly the process of his decision-making in the matter of Januarius’ will, and generously explains the “why” behind his choices, rather than simply citing his episcopal authority, intellectual superiority, or even his advanced age and wisdom. Augustine acknowledges that not everyone in his Church will like his decisions, or agree with them. Although he is concerned about his reputation to the degree that it helps or harms his fellow members of Christ’s body, he is not concerned with being popular or beloved for the sake of being well liked. Augustine is willing to be unpopular, disliked, and misunderstood if he believes those are the costs of serving the spiritual welfare of the many. However, he will not cease from trying to correct misunderstandings and mistrust.

## Conclusion

This paper has considered Augustine’s public handling of a clerical misconduct incident against the backdrop of his own pastoral vocation and monastic ideals. Augustine takes the call to ordained ministry seriously, and holds his ministers to the highest standards of personal conduct. He grounds his communities’ requirement of voluntary poverty in the example of Christ’s kenotic humility, and defines it as an expression of fraternal charity. Therefore, any failure to fulfill this vow is a failure to love, and is a source of scandal to one’s immediate family, religious community, and local Church. Augustine’s sermons demonstrate the proper response of ecclesial leadership to clerical scandal — a response characterized by transparency, openness, honesty, reconciliation, and accountability.

Although I have argued at some length for a reading of Augustine’s words that defines ordained ministry as the most serious of responsibilities and holds clerics to the highest possible standards of Christ-like behavior, in closing, it would be wise to remember the Donatist<sup>77</sup> controversy that demanded so much of his pastoral attention. By the time Augustine delivers Sermons 355 and 356, he has

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<sup>77</sup> In the early fourth century, Donatus and his followers had been scandalized by Church leaders who succumbed to imperial persecution and handed over copies of the sacred scriptures rather than be killed. The Donatists could not believe that these “traitors” could be forgiven, even if they were sincerely repentant. They also believed that all sacraments administered by the *traditores* or those ordained by them were invalid.

wrangled for decades with a vocal, rigorist sectarian majority, which claims that the grace of the Church and the validity of the sacraments originate from the appropriate behavior and proper moral character of the ministers themselves. Ultimately, even when dealing with painful and shameful scandals, Augustine will never concede that legitimate disgust with or disappointment over the failures of leaders should rend one from the Church. Sources of scandal and opportunities for offense are certain to arise. On that very subject, we might do well to remember what he once told a gathering of the faithful in the Easter season of 407:

Let us endure the world, let us endure tribulations, let us endure the scandal of trials. Let us not turn aside from the way. Let us hold onto the unity of the Church, let us hold onto Christ, let us hold onto charity. Let us not be torn away from the members of his bride, let us not be torn away from the faith, so that we may glory in his presence, and we shall remain secure in him, now through faith and then through sight, the pledge of which we have as the gift of the Holy Spirit.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Augustine, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, trans. by Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2008): 144 (Homily 9, 11).



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