

Augustine on the True Presence and the Eucharist as Sacrament of Unity

ELIZABETH KLEIN

Augustine Institute

Denver, CO

Augustine's understanding of the Eucharist has been a thorny topic for theologians (both within the academy and without) since the Reformation.¹ Ulrich Zwingli cited Augustine as an authority in favor of his merely symbolic understanding of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist at the colloquy of Marburg, to which Martin Luther reportedly conceded: "You have Augustine and Fulgentius on your side, but we have all the other fathers."² John Calvin also insistently took Augustine to be in his camp on the question of the Eucharist, citing, for example, Augustine's John commentary in a refutation of the Roman doctrine of transubstantiation—specifically regarding what happens when an unbeliever eats of the Eucharist: "Let those, therefore, who make unbelievers partakers of the flesh and blood of Christ, if they would agree with Augustine, set before us the visible body of Christ, since, according to him, the whole truth is spiritual."³ To this day, some Protestant commentators maintain a narrative about the theology of the Eucharist that follows a trajectory something like this: Augustine had a more spiritual or symbolic understanding of the

¹ Augustine was, of course, also cited in earlier Eucharistic debates (such as in the dispute between Ratramnus and Paschasius), but the modern debate certainly traces back to the intense controversy surrounding transubstantiation during the Reformation.

² Reported in Philip Schaff, *History of the Church*, 3rd ed., vol. 7 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), no. 108.

³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 17.34, trans. and ed. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845).

sacrament, but this understanding was slowly effaced in the early to late Middle Ages, and then recovered at the Reformation. Correspondingly, in academia, Augustine's theology of the sacraments is often ignored or underplayed, no doubt in part due to the inheritance of this Protestant memorialist narrative.

At the heart of the debate over Augustine's view of the Eucharist is his view of the effect of the sacraments. Are the sacraments, and the Eucharist in particular, a cause of *sanctification* for Augustine? Or are they merely a kind of symbol or reminder, one means among many for strengthening faith? Phillip Cary, perhaps the most vigorous opponent of seeing any efficacy in Augustine's sacramental theology, argues that Augustine "has no room for such a notion, which I shall label 'efficacious external means of grace.'" ⁴ But, at the same time, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* draws liberally from Augustine in its description of the Eucharist and its effects (for example, see §§1372, 1396, and 1398), as does Thomas Aquinas—particularly on the question pertaining to the effect of the sacrament. ⁵

How can Augustine's legacy be so hotly contested, claimed by two opposing camps on such an essential theological question? The short answer is that Augustine speaks about Christ's presence in the Eucharist as symbolic and as real in equal measure, and that both modes of expression were entirely natural to him. But that is not a wholly adequate answer. What *is* Augustine's Eucharistic theology and how does it accommodate this breadth of expression? What does the Eucharist really mean for him? Part of the difficulty of discerning Augustine's Eucharistic theology is his reticence to speak about it directly, ⁶ but let us take as our point of departure two passages from book

⁴ Phillip Cary, *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine's Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), ix.

⁵ See, for example, *Summa theologiae* [ST] III, q. 73, aa. 3 and 5; q. 74, aa. 1 and 3; q. 75, a. 5; q. 77, a. 7; q. 78, a. 5. On the effect, see ST III, q. 79, aa. 1–2 and 6–7.

⁶ Part of this silence comes from Augustine's strict adherence to the *disciplina arcani*. James O'Donnell notes: "In all the years after his baptism and ordination, in all the five million surviving words of his works, Augustine never describes or discusses the cult act that was the centre of his ordained ministry" (introduction in Augustine, *Confessions*, vol. 1 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012], xxix). Augustine often uses circumlocutions (for example: *Sermones ad Populum* 37.27; 132.1; *Enarratione in Psalmos* 48.3) or suggests that only the faithful will really know what he is talking about (for a few examples, see *Sermones ad Populum* 4.31; 5.7; 58.5; 90.1; 198 [=Dolbeau 26]; *Enarratione in Psalmos* 21.27; 32.2.2; 33.5; 39.12; *In Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 26.13; *De Civitate Dei* 10.6). The few places where he discusses the Eucharist at any length and fairly openly are in *De civ.* 10, in his homilies on John 6, and in his homilies to the neophytes during Easter week, but even in these texts he is often more indirect than one would like.

1 of *De doctrina Christiana* in which Augustine explicitly mentions the Eucharist and where he sounds, at first blush, very much like a Zwinglian.

Those, you see, who practice or venerate some kind of thing which is a significant sign, unaware of what it signifies, are enslaved under signs, while those who either carry out or venerate useful signs established by God, fully understanding their force and significance, are not in fact venerating what can be seen and passes away, but rather that reality to which all such things are to be referred. . . . In this time, though, after the clearest indication of our freedom has shone upon us in the resurrection of our Lord, we are no longer burdened with the heavy duty of carrying out even those signs [i.e., of the old covenant] whose meaning we now understand. But the Lord himself and the discipline of the apostles has handed down to us just a few signs instead of many, and these so easy to perform, and so awesome to understand, and so pure and chaste to celebrate, such as the sacrament of baptism, and the celebration of the Lord's body and blood. When people receive these, they have been so instructed that they can recognize to what sublime realities they are to be referred, and so they venerate them in a spirit not of carnal slavery, but rather of spiritual freedom.⁷

After this introduction to the signs of the old and new covenants, Augustine begins to give examples and to explain how one determines if something in Scripture is literal or figurative. In this context, he brings up John 6:53:

If it is an expression of command, either forbidding infamy or crime, or ordering usefulness or kindness, it is not figurative. But if it seems to command infamy or crime, or to forbid usefulness or kindness, then it is figurative. *Unless you eat*, he says, *the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you shall not have life in you* (Jn 6:53). He seems to be commanding a crime or an act of infamy; so it is said figuratively, instructing us that we must share in the Lord's passion, and store away in our minds the sweet and useful memory that his flesh was crucified and wounded for our sakes.⁸

⁷ *De doctrina Christiana* 1.3.9, in *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana)*, trans. Edmund Hill (1991; rep. New York: New City, 2017).

⁸ *De doc.* 1.6.24. He speaks similarly about John 6, e.g. in *In Iohan. ev. tract.* 27.11, where he says that John 6 tells us "about those who were scandalized who knew spiritual things in a carnal way" (trans. Edmund Hill [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2009]).

The sum total of these two texts is that Augustine admonishes us not to take John 6 too literally, or we will fall into practicing useless signs, as did many in the old covenant. Eating the flesh of Christ means conforming ourselves to him and remembering him. Why would Augustine say such things if he had a robust understanding of the true presence, even if on necessarily different terms from the later doctrine of transubstantiation? Some historical context will help us to see what he means.

Firstly, it is not credible that Augustine had the same kind of spiritualized understanding of cultic practices as some of the Reformers did, nor as modern people do. For every citation from Augustine that sounds highly symbolic in regards to the Eucharist, one can find another that sounds highly realistic. For example, Augustine can say, “recognize in the bread what hung on the cross, and in the cup what flowed from his side.”⁹ Moreover, Augustine’s cultural context is simply a highly cultic one. J. J. O’Donnell writes:

Why do we downplay cult initiation for Augustine? There are several reasons, beginning with our own prejudices. Few modern scholars (indeed, few moderns of any stripe, including the most ardent proponents of a traditional doctrine of transubstantiation) hold a view of the importance and efficacy of cult acts that even remotely approaches the visceral reverence for cult that all late antique men and women felt.¹⁰

And, if one looks at Ambrose’s mystagogical catechesis, the very same sort that Augustine himself had heard from Ambrose, it is hard to imagine Augustine being trained to think of the Eucharist in any kind of solely spiritualized way.¹¹ Allan Fitzgerald likewise writes:

It has often been asked whether Augustine taught the same doctrine as we presently hold. . . . Some scholars, by way of comparison, said that Augustine only believed in a symbolic presence, while Ambrose believed in a real presence of Christ. These discussions failed to recognize the mindset that Ambrose and Augustine shared: they simply presumed the real presence of Christ. Not having to defend that nor

⁹ *Sermones ad Populum* 228.2. Pamela Jackson catalogs a series of highly realistic quotations in Augustine alongside highly symbolic ones in “Eucharist,” in *Augustine through the Ages*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 332–33.

¹⁰ O’Donnell, *Confessions*, 1:xxviii.

¹¹ See, for example, Ambrose, *De Mysteriis* 9.54–55.

any other aspect of Eucharistic doctrine, their pastoral objectives were focused on other problems.¹²

We, therefore, have to bear in mind Augustine's audience: he is writing and preaching to a Christian community that is already inclined to an unhealthy or overly simplistic view of cultic acts.¹³ But even more specifically, Augustine's chief theological opponents at the time of his writing the first book of *De doctrina* are the Donatists. According to Augustine, the Donatists have precisely the kind of literalistic understanding of the Church and of the Eucharist that he is worried about; they act as if intercommunion with a sinner could contaminate the soul, and as if the signified, we might say, of the visible Church (that is, the Church triumphant) is going to be manifested on the earth.¹⁴ Regarding these passages in *De doctrina*, Rowan Williams therefore comments

To look at the cross then, and to "sign" ourselves with it, is to accept the same limits [i.e., the limits of history and therefore of signs] and to live in hope, and Augustine adds, oddly at first sight, to have proper reverence for the sacraments; not so odd if we see this as a further illustration of the need to see the symbolic life of the Church itself as pointing beyond itself, rather than providing a ground for spiritual complacency and stasis (as for the Donatists, perhaps, whom Augustine certainly has in mind here).¹⁵

¹² Allan D. Fitzgerald, "Saint Augustine and the Eucharist: The Presence of the Church," in *Our Journey Back to God: Reflections on Augustinian Spirituality*, ed. M. A. Keller (Rome: Curia Generalizia Agostiniana, 2006), 240.

¹³ That his audience had such an inclination is implicit in the strong anti-carpharnaitism of his homilies on John 6. Take, for example, *In Iohan. ev. tract.* 27.15: "What is this then, *the flesh is no use at all*? It is no use at all, but in the way those people understood it; they understood flesh as that which is torn off a cadaver or sold at the butcher's."

¹⁴ Patout Burns also argues that the context of the Donatist controversy is essential for understanding Augustine's Eucharistic theology. By emphasizing ecclesial unity (what we might now call the mystical body) as the *res* of the sacrament, rather than Christ's historical or resurrected body as such, Burns argues that Augustine is able to completely sidestep any question about what happened at Donatist Eucharists; in schism they had a sign with no signified ("The Eucharist as the Foundation of Christian Unity is North African Theology," *Augustinian Studies* 32, no. 1 [2001]: 1–23, at 15–17; see also 22 regarding the idea that Augustine's theology excludes the possibility of pollution spreading through the Church).

¹⁵ Rowan Williams, "Language, Reality and Desire: The Nature of Christian Formation," in *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 49.

In light of this historical context, we will now hear Augustine's warning in *De doctrina* loud and clear. Just as many under the old covenant did not understand the spiritual meaning of the signs that they performed, so also if we think our salvation is a *fait accompli* by the mere practice of cult, we are gravely mistaken.¹⁶ We might think of the Donatists as having the opposite temptation of the memorialists. If memorialists think of the Eucharist as a sign but not a destination (i.e., as a means or way but not an end), then the Donatists think of the Eucharist as a destination but not as a sign. For a Donatist, if you receive, you have arrived, which is why there is such high stakes when it comes to who receives and from whom.¹⁷

Augustine's position lies in between these two extremes, and he is not arguing for the Zwinglian one simply because he rejects the Donatist: the Eucharist is a sign, but it is only a sacrament because it actually does signify. If the Eucharist does not do anything, if it does not convey what is being signified, if it does not actually begin the work of sanctification, then it is only a carnal sign received in the spirit of slavery, as in the case of many under the old law and of the Donatists. Articulating this understanding of Augustine's Eucharistic theology helps us to understand the fittingness of the image of journeying that appears earlier on in book 1 of *De doctrina*. There, Augustine is explaining his distinction between what is to be used and what is to be enjoyed. He says that everything except God is to be used, like a sea-faring vessel or land vehicle that conveys us to the homeland from which we are in exile. If we fall in love with the journey or the vehicle—the things to be used—we will never reach our destination.¹⁸ If we apply this paradigm to the sacraments, we could hear Augustine saying that the sacraments are simply a kind of tool employed for a task and then discarded. That reading would be a mistake, however, as is clear from the fact that our neighbors are also, according to Augustine, to be used,¹⁹ but they are not merely a means to an end, nor will they be discarded when we are at journey's end. Instead, what Augustine is trying to express is that things are loved properly precisely when they bring us to God and when they are done for God's sake. If anything is

¹⁶ See *In Iohan. ev. tract.* 26.15 and 27.11. Fitzgerald summarizes Augustine's concern by saying: "An instinctive reverence for religion was not enough for Augustine; he would show the weakness and the falsity of pagan claims about their worship" ("Saint Augustine and the Eucharist," 241).

¹⁷ See Burns, "Eucharist as the Foundation," 18–19, on the North African view of unity with the Church as essential for salvation.

¹⁸ *De doc.* 1.4.4.

¹⁹ *De doc.* 1.22.20.

possessed privately or if anything is taken to be our final destination other than God, we will love improperly, both the neighbor and God.

This explanation of use and enjoyment with reference to a vehicle is actually a very helpful analogy for illuminating our discussion about the Eucharist.²⁰ The Donatists board the ship and think they have reached the homeland. The memorialists believe that the ship is simply supposed to remind them of the homeland. Augustine understands that one must board a ship bound for the homeland but never mistake that ship for the final resting place—that is, not mistake coming to the altar for coming to the beatific vision; rather, we must allow the sacrament to transport us there through the continued process of sanctification that it offers. And the sacraments, like all those neighbors that we use in order to enjoy God, are not discarded in the beatific vision; rather, they come to their resting place on that distant shore along with us. In short, they convey us to the signified. Understanding this Augustinian view of the sacraments, I think, also helps us to see why he used the word “sacrament” in such a capacious way: for him, “sacrament” can refer to any mystery, including those in Scripture, that point us to God and can be used by us to get to him.

Even so, what we would now consider more narrowly the sacraments of the Church are still set apart from other signs in that they are not a mere word, but a word added to a material element—which is Augustine’s definition of sacrament²¹ used throughout the Middle Ages and beyond, including in both Luther and Calvin—and among these sacraments, the Eucharist is unique. If I have contended that the Eucharist must do its signifying work in order to be truly a sacrament, what work does the Eucharist do in particular? The Eucharist is the body of Christ, which, according to Augustine, effects unity: unity with each other and with God. It would be hard to overstate how important this idea of unity is for Augustine. For him, unity with Christ in his body the Church constitutes salvation. Be in Christ’s body, Augustine says, and you will go into heaven where the head has gone.²² Christ’s body—in the Incarnation, in the Church, and in the Eucharist²³—is the center of Augustinian theology around which everything else orbits.

²⁰ Augustine uses the image of a ship bound for the homeland also for the Church (see, for example, *Sermones ad Populum* 75), which likewise is brought to its completion rather than discarded upon arrival.

²¹ *In Iohan. ev. tract.* 80.3.

²² See, for example, *Sermones ad Populum* 272 and *In Iohan. ev. tract.* 26.13. In both these instances, this soteriological explanation comes in the context of a discussion of the Eucharist.

²³ See also *Sermones ad Populum* 341. Tarcisius van Bavel also expounds on these three

De Trinitate book 4, which is essentially a short treatise on salvation, is helpful for showing this centrality of the sacrament of Christ's body. The main thrust of Augustine's argument in this book is to show how Christ is the perfect mediator and harmonizer, bringing together and fulfilling in his person disparate or divided things—soul and body, word and meaning, priest and sacrifice, time and eternity—in short, God and man. “The sinner did not match the just, but man did match man. So he applied to us the similarity of his humanity to take away the dissimilarity of our iniquity, and becoming a partaker of our mortality, he made us partakers of his divinity.”²⁴ This unification occurs by way of the sacrament of Christ's body:

But being clothed with mortal flesh, in that alone he died and in that alone he rose again; and so in that alone he harmonized with each part of us by becoming in that flesh the sacrament for the inner man and the model for the outer one.²⁵

Here Augustine underscores the importance of the body of Christ as sacrament for the sake of the “inner man.” What is the inner man? The Pauline language of the inner and outer man is critical to the latter half of *De Trinitate*, where Augustine is searching for the image of God in humankind. This

meanings of “body of Christ” for Augustine (historical, Eucharistic, and ecclesial): “These three meanings are strongly interconnected and cannot be separated from one another.” His article aims at demonstrating the importance of the *Christus totus*, including how this ought to shape our understanding of Augustine's Eucharistic theology (“The ‘Christus Totus’ Idea: A Forgotten Aspect of Augustine's Spirituality,” in *Studies in Patristic Christology*, ed. Thomas Finan and Vincent Twomey [Dublin: Four Courts, 1998], 84–94). By contrast, Patout Burns argues that the historical body of Christ is “sharply contrasted” with his ecclesial body in Augustine's Eucharistic thought (see “Eucharist as the Foundation,” 11). Due to Augustine's understanding of the intimate unity of *Christus totus*, it is not totally clear to me why Burns makes this claim; he references the Easter sermons to the neophytes (see *Sermones ad Populum* 225–29 and 272). I take Augustine in those sermons to be explaining how Christ's body can be present in the Eucharist when he has already ascended into heaven. He does so not by contrasting Christ's historical body and his ecclesial one, but by showing how they are of a piece and mediated by the sacrament. The tone is one of common sense (i.e., we do not see Christ here at the liturgy, and we know that he went into heaven, so why do we call this bread his body?)—see for example, his explanation in Sermon 272. In short, I take Augustine to be explaining the mode of Christ's presence, not attempting to distinguish and separate Christ's historical body from his ecclesial one.

²⁴ *De Trinitate* 4.2.4, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City, 1991).

²⁵ *De Trin.* 4.3.6: “Sed indutus carne mortali et sola moriens, sola resurgens, ea sola nobis ad utrumque concinuit cum in ea fieret interioris hominis sacramentum, exterioris exemplum.”

image, he says, can only be found in our inner man, that is, in our mind as it worships God.²⁶ The outer man, by contrast, refers to our mind as it works on things in the world, and so encompasses everything from sense perceptions to the cardinal virtues;²⁷ an exploration of the outer man occupies books 9–13. Even faith, Augustine argues, belongs to the outer man, since we will no longer need to have faith in the beatific vision.²⁸ Understanding to what the phrase “inner man” refers makes Augustine’s argument in book 4 all the more striking: it was in his *flesh alone* that Christ was the sacrament for the *inner* man, and this sacrament is surely a material sign that effects what it signifies, meaning that the death and resurrection of Christ’s flesh defeats death and effects the resurrection of the inner man. It would be quite odd for Augustine to emphasize this sacrament that is the flesh of Christ if, for him, there was no such thing as an external means of efficacious grace. One would expect him to emphasize that the grace flowed more so from Christ’s intention or his spirit or something of that kind, but Augustine’s point is that body and soul in Christ are in complete harmony, and that the Cross accomplishes that harmony in all humankind. In other words, it was the act of Christ’s mortal flesh that harmonized us with ourselves interiorly and with God (the inner man), and which gave us the perfect model exteriorly to imitate in our actions in the world (the outer man).

If in the Eucharist we have that same sacrament, that same mystery, it is no surprise that Augustine can speak about it both as the sacrament for the inner man (i.e., as a means of grace, as a means of unity with God) and also a symbol or a reminder (i.e., the prime model for the outer man, recalling that even faith belongs to the outer man). But given the argument of *De Trinitate*, we should not even be so quick to assume that, when Augustine is speaking of keeping Christ in our memory as he does in book 1 of *De doctrina* when he admonishes us to “store away in our minds the sweet and useful memory that his flesh was crucified and wounded for our sakes,”²⁹ he is strictly speaking about the outer man, that is, that he is simply exhorting us to think about Christ or to have faith in his death and resurrection. His entire argument about memory towards the end *De Trinitate* is that memory is the ground of our being, that it refers not simply to recalling past events, but to *being* recalled to God.³⁰ That is the first and most fundamental stage of conversion. It is no coincidence, then, that book 14 of *De Trinitate*, which is the last step

²⁶ See especially *De Trin.* 14.1.1 and 14.4.15.

²⁷ *De Trin.* 14.3.12.

²⁸ See *De Trin.* 14.1.3–5.

²⁹ *De doc.* 1.6.24.

³⁰ *De Trin.* 14.4.21.

of his argument in attempting to locate the image of the Trinity in the inner man, is replete with liturgical references. Book 14 demonstrates that it is by baptism and by “turning to the Lord”³¹ in the Eucharistic liturgy that the inner man is being renewed; in other words, it is being renewed by the flesh of Christ that is the sacrament for the inner man. Augustine’s fascination with memory as the place of encountering God is also evident elsewhere, most notably in *Confessiones* book 10, a book written in a Eucharistic key.³²

Moreover, in *De Trinitate* book 1, Augustine also speaks about the humanity of Christ as having the function of a sign, just as he does for the sacraments in *De doctrina*. He is trying to explain the meaning of 1 Cor 15:24: “Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power.” The verse would seem to imply that Christ is less than the Father. To explain it, Augustine appeals to his hermeneutic of Philippians 2, namely, that we can speak of Christ either in the form of God or in the form of slave (or both), and that this verse is therefore referring to Christ in his humanity. But Augustine goes further: what could that possibly *mean* that Christ in his humanity hands over the kingdom? He explains that the verse means “when he brings believers to a direct contemplation of God and the Father,” that is, “when there is no more need for the regime of symbols administered by angels; . . . *we see now through a glass in a puzzle*, that is in symbols, but *then it shall be face to face*.”³³ Recall that Augustine is explaining what Paul is saying about Christ in the form of slave, that is, in his humanity. Christ’s humanity is a sign, which Augustine goes on to demonstrate with the example of Philip, who did not yet understand that when he saw Christ he was also seeing Father.³⁴ Christ affirms his divinity in his exchange with Philip, but also acknowledges that it requires faith to see it, because his humanity is a sign that is not completely transparent; Christ has not yet handed over the kingdom. Rehearsing a theme that we have already seen, Augustine explains that Christ handing over the kingdom finally means incorporating us into his body and bringing it to where the head is: “His faithful, after all, whom he

³¹ *De Trin.* 14.4.21–5.22, Augustine in these passages twice echoes the *conversi ad Dominum* (“turn to the Lord”), a summons which Augustine himself would give to his congregation after the homily. It indicates turning to the Lord in prayer, which perhaps included physically turning to the East.

³² For more on this point, see John Cavadini, “Eucharistic Exegesis in Augustine’s *Confessions*,” in *Visioning Augustine* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2019), 184–211. See also Fitzgerald’s discussion of *Conf.* 10.42.67–70, the strongly Eucharistic conclusion of that book, in “Saint Augustine and the Eucharist,” 244–47.

³³ *De Trin.* 1.8.16.

³⁴ *De Trin.* 1.8.17.

bought with his blood, are called his kingdom (Rv 1:5), and he now makes intercession for them (Rom 8:34), but then he will attach them to himself there where he is equal to the Father, and will no longer beg the Father for them.”³⁵ Christ’s body—his humanity and the Church together—will be delivered to the Father, and all signs will cease.

So, for Augustine, that Christ will hand over the kingdom does not mean that Christ’s humanity is not the locus of his divinity, nor does it mean that Christ’s humanity ceases to exist in the beatific vision. Rather, it means that Christ’s body the Church is still *in via*, and finally it will be brought to where the head is already, resting in the bosom of the Father. Furthermore, it means we require faith to see Christ’s humanity for what it is. So also, we should understand that when Augustine speaks of the Eucharist (which is Christ’s body available to us now³⁶) as a sign, or as a vehicle, he does not mean that it is not also the true presence of Christ who is divine, nor does he mean that the Eucharist is simply a tool to be discarded, but that this body is the way by which we are brought finally to the Father. It is also the body of Christ even if we require faith to receive it for what it is.

We are perhaps not used to Augustine’s way of speaking about the Eucharist, but I think it has something important and timely to communicate to us. If the Eucharist is not doing its signifying work, if it is not ordered towards effecting unity, according to Augustine, we will receive it to our damnation, like the Donatists. If we think that, by virtue of receiving the Eucharist, we have come to our final destination, we will actually thwart the work of the sacrament. The Eucharist, as Christ’s body, is the way that is also our end; it is the sign that effects what it signifies. It is also, as the *Catechism* puts it, “an anticipation of the heavenly glory” (§1402).³⁷ But now in this time it *is* still operating as the *way*, it *is* still actively signifying as a *sign*. And so follows Augustine’s famous but seemingly redundant advice to the neophytes: “Be what you receive, and receive what you are.”³⁸ By this he means that in the

³⁵ *De Trin.* 1.10.21.

³⁶ A point that Augustine expresses in an especially poignant way in *Sermones ad Populum* 235.5, where he sees in the road to Emmaus an important pedagogical moment for the Church: “Ah yes, brothers and sisters, but where did the Lord wish to be recognized? In the breaking of bread. . . . It was for our sakes that he didn’t want to be recognized anywhere but there, because we weren’t going to see him in the flesh, and yet we were going to eat his flesh.”

³⁷ Gerald Bonner also argues that, for Augustine, the Eucharist is the moment when the eschatological Church is glimpsed (“The Church and the Eucharist in the Theology of St. Augustine,” *Sobornost* 7, no. 6 [1978]: 448–61).

³⁸ Sermon 272.

Eucharist we truly receive perfected humanity in unity with divinity,³⁹ and at the same time we are not yet perfect. We are not yet in unity with the divine, and so we must let the sacrament do its work of sanctification in us so that, as Augustine admonishes, our “amen” might be true. N·V

³⁹ Burns argues strongly that Augustine does not have the Alexandrian conception of Christ’s divinity being applied to our humanity in the Eucharist, as a means of healing corruption. I have aimed to show through my discussion of *De Trinitate* 4 that he does indeed have some such conception, albeit in a different modality from that of the Alexandrians—it is unity with Christ as mediator and harmonizer that allows us to be restored as human beings and united to the divine.