SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON HOLINESS IN SAINT AUGUSTINE

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Some Considerations on Holiness in Saint Augustine

The article aims to present several lines of thought of Saint Augustine's, which are part of his theory of holiness. In a series of works on marriage and virginity, Saint Augustine subtly captures the differences between the two lifestyles and emphasizes the virtues of each, realizing that a Christian community cannot grow in the absence of marriage and the birth of infants, but neither can it be complete in the absence of asceticism. But asceticism is not always just about following a path chosen by the individual through free will. It is the culmination of a divine plan, which bears the imprint of holiness when it intersects with the will of man. Thus, in *De sancta uirginitate*, Saint Augustine distinguishes between *sancta uirgo* and *uirgo*, sketching the two types of human model. Focusing on the former, which is visibly more agreeable, allows a reflection on the spiritual ties between generations and on the significance of legitimate marriage, from which babies with a certain soul structure are born. However, the personal responsibility of the individual who joins the path of asceticism remains a priority, and the observance of the oath of chastity and the improvement of one's moral profile remain two indispensable conditions to fulfil.

Keywords: *holiness*; *vow*; *soul*; *body*; *divine nature*; *sancta uirgo.*

I. Holiness and the holy people

The history of religions and the philosophy of religions show that *holiness* is a concept which illustrates a characteristic of divine nature, sometimes attributed to humans (regarding one's flawless morality, specific

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spiritual endowments and a certain innate disposition to mirror the divine pattern), places or objects; it is usually used as a synonym for *sanctity*, *sacredness* or *perfection*. When approaching holiness in the Christian context[1], scholars often introduce into the conversation a few notions to be retained for their usefulness. Two of these notions best fit the goal of my paper, which deals with Saint Augustine's theory of holiness in *De sancta uirginitate*: the "alignment with God's purposes" and human "responsibility" (Baxter 1989: 507-517 *passim*)[2]. Reflecting on them and adjusting them to my analysis, we find that the first implies a *close relationship with God*, while the latter expresses the *awareness* raised among the people deemed holy by the group to which they socially belong[3]: these people understand that they must think and act suitably.

Talking about the position of prominence of a holy person in a group leads to the question if, in comparison to that one person, the rest of the group is automatically sinful[4] (the answer is no; given the fact that holiness

[1] For the Christian sense of holiness, see Blaise 1954, *sanctitas*: '1) caractère saint, sainteté 2) sainteté, pureté de vie; chasteté, continence; vertu qui nous rend saints (ἁγιασμός)'.

[2] Anthony Baxter considers that the alignment with God's purposes attracts holiness, while the choice not to respond positively to God's call, an attitude which stresses upon the idea of human responsibility, attracts sin.

[3] We refer to the prophets, saints, in one word, servants of God who performed miracles in front of the others or had clairvoyant abilities that helped them anticipate events, which, eventually, came true. The role of the community in validating the profile of a holy person is essential. However, *subjectivity* remains one of the biggest issues when questioning one's holiness, because even if we could all reach an agreement on the criteria to apply (imagining holiness is only about a series of virtues put together – a very reductive assumption, given the fact that it is a characteristic of the divine nature –), we still could not measure their intensity, integrity, infallibility. Human actions and thoughts are indeed proof of virtues, but if an alleged holy person's acts can be witnessed, thoughts cannot. It is difficult to ascribe holiness to somebody: "In contrast to other qualifications and other virtues, no one can formally attribute holiness to anyone else whatsoever. The holiness of anyone remains *for us* (*quod ad nos*) undecidable; the saint consequently remains for us formally invisible. The question of the saint's holiness paradoxically begins to be raised from its invisibility" (Marion and Gschwandtner 2009: 705). This idea of invisibility, of transparency associated to holiness, makes us value more the role of intuition, of personal feeling, which is the essence of subjectivity: "(…) we may say that 'holiness' or 'sacredness' (as used on some occasion) is an evocative designation of an intuitively felt property of an item, and that the analogical and decompositional analysis of this evocative designation represents (to different degrees) precise explications of the phenomenon evoked" (Smith 1988: 513). The feeling is, in Rudolf Otto's point of view, the best way, if not the single way to take act of the holiness itself as a primary, divine characteristic, transferable to humans (Otto 1936: 12, 145). On the perfection of the deemed holy people, on *theosis* and on the overall spiritual context of the third century, *cf.* Spencer 2004: 125-127.

[4] On the distinction between holiness and sin, see Baxter 1989: 506-517, Flanagan 2018, Van

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means much more than a complex jointing of virtues, it cannot be reduced to the simple absence of sin). Saint Augustine found a very pleasant way to deal with this inevitable, yet very common preoccupation among Christian believers. Besides presenting the *sanctae uirgines* as *an excellent human model* in *De sancta uirginitate*, he introduced the *uirgines*, a *more accessible human model*, that, anyway, cannot pass unnoticed. As we are about to illustrate in the next pages, he showed that, in a Christian community, *sanctae uirgines* coexist not only with the *uirgines*, but also with other people. These normal people felt the need to see with their own eyes and to ensure that the *sanctae uirgines* were (at least in a way) just like them, made of flesh and bones. A simple and easily demonstrable conviction, after all, but strong enough to cause a change on the overall perception of holiness: holiness can be reached, but in certain conditions, and Saint Augustine reveals them one by one. Of course, the *sancta uirgo* and the *uirgo* do not share the same rank, but both of them are still human models, and there is no point at all in isolating these persons from the rest of the people; on the contrary, exposing them invites to imitation, which is better suited to the intentions of improving the standards of the growing Christian community.

In my opinion, human holiness is, metaphorically speaking, an emanation of divine holiness, while divine holiness is an endless stream of goodness, graciousness, pureness, forgiveness, humility, mercy, justice (on justice and holiness, see Weiss 1985: 334-341) and the list may continue. The infinite transcendent dimension of divine nature makes finding a comprehensive definition of the concept difficult[5]. Rudolf Otto opened the way to a better understanding of the phenomenon, placing emphasis on its manifestations. In *The Idea of the Holy. An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, Rudolf Otto's defines holiness as an "*a priori* category" (Otto 1936: 140), "a category of interpretation and valuation peculiar to the sphere of religion" (Otto 1936: 5). He argues that, originally, holiness had a *non-rational* dimension (meaning that the divinity expressed itself through two types of complementary emotions that our ancestors experienced when worshiping it: the *mysterium tremendum*, which, pervading their minds like a tide (Otto 1936: 12), generated an overwhelming state of fear and dread, and the *mysterium fascinans*, which exuded "ideas of goodness, mercy, love", Otto 1936: 145), while the *rational* sense that the term acquired in time is "derivative" (Otto 1936: 5). By describing this process, the German philosopher acknowledges the potential of religious moods

de Walle 2017.

[5] Johnston 1962: 383: "(…) holiness (…) implies primarily the ineffable majesty of God".

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in playing a decisive part in the rise of ethics; the passage from subjective moods to an objective set of rules, set up by ancient societies and recognized as such, was under no circumstances easy, but the result was significant: the birth of religious consciousness.

In *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values*, Max Scheler names holiness a virtue which is "communicable without limit and without any division and diminution (...). This pertains, first, to the «absolute» and «infinitely holy», the infinitely holy person – the divine. This value, «the divine», is in principle «proper» to any being just because it is the *most indivisible* value" (Scheler 1973: 94). Therefore, according to his theory, holiness is an *a priori*, pure value, primarily associated with divine nature. We all know that, throughout the time, in Christian communities, many worthful people were regarded as "holy", but we also know that they enjoyed this status thanks to their outstanding qualities, which resembled those of the divine. These people were not only merciful, good-hearted or quick forgivers, but they adopted a lifestyle that used to go far beyond mundane needs. By no means has the transfer of holiness from the divinity to humans[6] ever impoverished divinity. Max Scheler says it clear that holiness remains independent of the person who embodies it. Hence, the strong temptation to emphasize the bearer and not value itself often leads to a restrictive outlook on the phenomenon. Saint Augustine was apt in choosingthe title for one of his writings, specifically the one we are going to talk about, *De sancta uirginitate*, as he had holy virginity prevail over the holy virgins, he had the frame prevail over the image, he had theme prevail over content. I recollect Saint Augustine mentioning in one of his sermons the fact that, in contrast to material goods, peace never diminishes if shared; on the contrary, it increases (Saint Augustine, *De laude pacis* 1). I think that we could apply the same principle here as well. If embraced by many people, holiness increases, God's presence becomes more vivid; and this is Saint Augustine's goal in *De sancta uirginitate*, namely attracting his fellows to pursue an exceptional life, spreading not only God's words but also behaving like a sparkling reflection of him.

II. The need for Christian models and the role of imitation

The fourth century is relevant for the history of mentalities as it attests to several writings on virginity meant to celebrate ascetic existence and to encourage people to follow it. Basil of Ancyra, Gregory of Nazianzus,

[6] On the otherness of God, as a research topic in postmodern theology, *cf.* Sanders 1996: 572-587.

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Gregory of Nyssa or Saint Ambrose found their original ways of expressing how all the difficulties that the vow of virginity implied could have been overcome by emphasizing spiritual achievement. Some specialists consider that the reason why this interest flourished in the fourth century is linked to the need of presenting a new human model at the end of the Christian persecutions. In their opinion, asceticism even exceeded martyrdom as it did not only suppose temporary corporal sufferance, but it was a permanent exercise of body and soul together (Viller 1925: 105-142, Brock 1973: 2)[7]. Nevertheless, virginity did have something in common with martyrdom: the fact that both were recommended to all people, thus women shared an equal position with men. For women, asceticism was sometimes a solution to escape social pressure consisting of getting married at young ages, enduring domestic violence or raising numerous children (Castelli 1986: 61-88). This explains why the majority of those who made a vow of virginity were women. But we must not forget that they were more favorably disposed to the vow of chastity than men also because the image of Mary, mother of Jesus, pure and virtuous, keeper of God's commandments, represented for them a wonderful feminine religious model[8].

At the beginning of the fifth century, Saint Augustine retraces the theme and draws attention to it a particular way. Even though he introduces a lot of references on virginity in *De bono coniugali*, *De bono uiduitatis*, *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* or *De coniugiis adulterinis*, he wholefully dedicated *De sancta uirginitate* to it. By approaching the theme of *sancta uirginitas* and not simply *uirginitas*, the author wisely defines the borderlines of his discourse, as he intends to speak about that particular ascetic human existence which acquires an almost divine dimension. However, throughout the presentation, Saint Augustine alludes to marriage and always values its importance, because it is with the use of the offsprings that a community of *sanctae uirgines*[9], namely, of consecrated virgins (Rees 1982: 229-236), can be established. As we shall see, in the case of virgins, holiness is partly achieved, but majorly it is a sort of external element which was passed on to them by God through their parents, united in marriage; my presentation focuses on this particular aspect, without overlooking the relationship between the two (apparently antagonistic) lifestyles, marriage and virginity.

[7] Saint Augustine sees martyrdom superior to virginity (*De sancta uirginitate* XLVI.47).

[8] Harrison 1999: 63: "(…) imitation is crucial – for it is by imitating what holy people can be seen to do – for example, charitable work, contemplating the gospels, and so on – that one is able to come to live the holy life oneself; and this then enables one to see God's reality in its fullness".

[9] Saint Augustine uses interchangeably both expressions, *sancta uirgo* and *sacra uirgo*.

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III. Marriage and virginity

For Saint Augustine, marriage is an institution that has both a public and private dimension (Rist 1994: 246). By "marriage" he understands an assumed monogamous relationship, based on friendship (Saint Augustine, *De bono coniugali* I.1), in which the partners show respect and pay attention to each other's needs, while not avoiding giving birth to children. The author intends to point out that, at the beginning of the fifth century, marriage drifted apart from its primary function (bearing children within a legal context), lost its virtues (devotion, compassion, love) and sacrament, facts which reduced it to a sort of concubinage[10]. The causes that led to this situation seem to be the absence of faith in God, the threatening rise of self-esteem and egoism which bring people in the position of discrediting others and seeking only their own satisfaction and happiness. In other words, *concupiscentia* tended to substitute *continentia* and, thus, became the symbolical image that best described the emerging role of individualism. There is absolutely no doubt that the historical moment, namely the end of Antiquity, is relevant to such transformations because the dissipation of ethical conventions echoes the collapse of Roman centralized political power and the weakening of geographical boundaries. Taking this background into consideration, *concupiscentia* is not only a human vice that grows within marriage, it is a social behaviour feature generated by the inevitable "macro" changes.

Besides being a lifestyle for all Christians who desire to live ethically, marriage represents a remarkable way of insertion in a new extended Christian community which is bound to present itself. For Saint Augustine, the problem seems to be not so much the fading Roman society, but the need to create a brand new one from its ashes, in which everything should illustrate God's will, an aspect beautifully underlined in the sequence of two persons' union in front of God. Thus, the author emphasizes that marriage is incomplete if it does not heed divine presence, in the church, because it is in the church where the couple starts to experience real inner transformation and learns what *continentia*, *humilitas, pietas, temperantia, caritas* mean. While living alone can cause suffering or desperation, marriage heals the human soul as it provides a conciliation of the opposites, unconditioned devotion and care for the other's redemption.

[10] On the sacrament of marriage, *cf.* Saint Augustine, *De bono coniugali* 7, XIII.15, XVII.19, XVIII.21, XX.23, XXIV.32. *Cf.* Tertullian, *De monogamia* IX, 6: *Matrimonium est, cum Deus duos iungit in unam carnem, aut iunctos deprehendens in eadem carne coniunctionem signauit*; on bearing children legitimately, *cf.* Saint Augustine, *De sancta uirginitate* 12.

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However, with all its strengths, marriage cannot exceed virginity. From the very beginning of the *De sancta uirginitate*, Saint Augustine states that divine law places virginity before marriage (…) *iure diuino continentia connubio, et nuptiis pia uirginitas anteponitur* (Saint Augustine, *De sancta uirginitate* I.1.). Corporal virginity is a consequence of spiritual virginity because making and maintaining the *uotum* depends on the spirit (*spiritus*): *Ac per hoc spiritualis est etiam uirginitas corporis, quam uouet et seruat continentia pietatis* (*ibid*., VIII.8). However, virginity is praised not for itself, but because it is dedicated to God: *Neque enim et ipsa quia uirginitas est, sed quia Deo dicata est honoratur* (…) (*ibid*.). For Saint Augustine, virginity means order, as it implies God's word in a disordered world, and last, but not least, it presumes an equal position for men and women. Even when talking about marriage, Saint Augustine's perspective on women remains the same. The woman is no longer seen as inferior to man, but as an equal partner, designed to give birth to offsprings. The feminine role is reconsidered now and we take heed of this impressive change when the author mentions the situations in which a woman may marry a second time, equal to those in which a man can do it, shortly described in the following lines: *Quomodo autem uiro possit esse licentia ducendae alterius, si adulteram reliquerit, cum mulieri non sit nubendi alteri, si adulterum reliquerit, non uideo* (Saint Augustine, *De bono coniugali* 7).

In *De bono coniugali*, one could discover several passages in which, talking about what women should do with their lives, the author says that they should marry and bear children, be mothers of their families: *Ac per hoc bonum est nubere, quia bonum est filios procreare, matrem familias esse* (*ibid.,* IX.9). However, immediately after stating this aspect, he adds that it would be good if they didn't marry*: sed melius est non nubere, quia melius est ad ipsam humanam societatem hoc opere non egere* (*ibid*.). This balance is typical for Saint Augustine's style, which seems continuously preoccupied not only by what is good but also by what is better to do as a Christian. Even this discoursive tone, which offers prescriptions, but does not impose obligations, is inspired by the Bible. Becoming a good Christian requires not only respecting the line between *what is wrong* and *what is right* but also reaching higher levels of *what is right* (*bonum est / melius est*). This is the equation of excellence, for permanent becoming, for not ever considering ourselves perfect. Last, but not least, since, in his times, there was not a vivid need for offsprings anymore, as there had been in previous times, Saint Augustine shows that marriage should be chosen only by those who cannot refrain themselves: *Unde mihi uidetur hoc tempore solos eos qui se*

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non continent, coniugari oportere, secundum illam eiusdem Apostoli sententiam: Quod si se non continent, nubant; melius est enim nubere quam uri (*ibid*., X.10). The need for *continentia* is thus strongly emphasized.

IV. Holiness, a link between God, parents and children

What is admirable in Saint Augustine is how he understands that, in a growing community like the Christian one, virginity without marriage is impossible. The ones who did not see that were wrong because they did not want to maintain a certain moderate line in between: (…) *quia ueritatis medium tenere noluerunt* (Saint Augustine, *De sancta uirginitate* XIX.19). At the beginning of *De sancta uirginitate*, Saint Augustine talks about the *Dei uirgines*, a potential starting point for later explorations, considering that, generally speaking, there are two sorts of virgins: *uirgines*, whose parents are unknown or illegitimately united, and *sanctae uirgines*, whose parents have made the vow of marriage in front of God. It all begins with the parents' legitimate union in the church. That glitter of holiness spread over them during the ceremony of the marriage sacrament, which remains in them until the end of time, is transferred to the offsprings, whose chances to become holy virgins increase, if an ascetic existence is desired. Still, sometimes, neither parent's legitimate union is enough: (…) *ita fit ut uirgo nascatur etiam de stupro, sacra autem uirgo nec de coniugio* (*ibid*., 10); the *sancta uirgo* still has to be gifted by God: *hoc enim non coniugii bonum est, sed naturae*[11], but also has to make herself worthy of it by permanently cultivating her virtues: *caritas*, *continentia*, but, most of all, *humilitas* (Saint Augustine, *De sancta uirginitate* XXXIII. 33; XLIII.44)[12].

[11] *Ibid*. *Natura* is employed here in a theological sense, *natura* as the divine nature (*cf.* Blaise 1954, see *natura*), which introduces the doctrine of predestination. The *sanctae uirgines* feel their call and follow it, becoming responsible for their actions: they make and maintain the vow of chastity, remaining unmarried for the rest of their lives. Saint Augustine's opinion is that human predestination, derived from God's foreknowledge, is a preparation stage for achieving grace: (…) *praedestinatio est gratiae praeparatio* (…) (*De praedestinatione sanctorum* X.19), an idea further developed in terms of *election* and *accomplishment*: *Electi sunt itaque ante mundi constitutionem ea praedestinatione, in qua Deus sua futura facta praescivit: electi sunt autem de mundo ea vocatione, qua Deus id quod praedestinavit, implevit* (*ibid*., XVII.34.). Divine grace is a fundamental concept in the doctrine of predestination, as it is only with the help of the divine grace that elected humans can do good and, so, respond accordingly to their call. On the complex doctrine of predestination, on grace and on the free will, *cf.* Garrigou-Lagrange and Garrigou-Lagrange 1931: 34-52, Lössl 2002: 241-272, Rist 1969: 420-447.

[12] In depicting the image of *sanctae uirgines*, Saint Augustine combines the doctrine of predestination with the theory of personal merits, outlining that even if predestination plays an

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In conclusion, Saint Augustine's thinking paradigm in terms of what is "good" and what is "better" to do as a Christian is reflected not only in the distinction between the two ways of living life, marriage and virginity, but also in the distinction between the categories of women who decided to follow the last one, *sanctae uirgines* and *uirgines*. The importance assigned to *sancta uirgo* illustrates the concept of holiness by placing emphasis on how strong the connection between God and people is, how precious the gifts sent from above are, how important the personal free will and the ensuing responsibility are, and how all this is, in fact, part of a divine plan[13].

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important part in this high degree spiritual journey, human strive is required as well. The author's reformulations or additions to these topics, in his varied writings, were such that scholars lacked a consensus of opinion; one of the reasons is that the doctrine of predestination was often treated in opposition to the doctrine of human free will, seen as an extension of the theory of personal merits. Nevertheless, Saint Augustine's parenetic discourse in *De sancta uirginitate* proves that, on this occasion, these two doctrines intertwine in the most functional, gratifying and spectacular way.

[13] Most of this article was conceived in Geneva, during my stay at the "Fondation Hardt" as a grant-holder, at the end of March, 2018.

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