

THREE AUGUSTINIAN PRINCIPLES REGARDING THE AGREEMENT OF GRACE WITH FREEDOM

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Abstract: Augustine never retracts his theories on freedom and on the plenitude of man to choose or to self-determine. He does not reproach to Pelagians to ask the power to choose, he even proclaims with them that, without this power, the responsibility would be canceled. God cannot command a constrained will, and the fact that he commands shows that man's will is free. God has endowed me with free will; if I have sinned, I am the one who sinned (*si peccavi, ego peccavi*). Christ's real disciple is the one that approaches Christ not for understanding what he wants, but to want what he understands.

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In the problem of the agreement of grace with freedom, the Augustinian *clavis* can be found in affirming the two truths to Augustine: man is free; man cannot do anything without grace¹. The statements are important, but they themselves do not solve the problem, they themselves only create the problem. The real *clavis* we find elsewhere, namely in the Augustinian explanation regarding the divine government of wills, therefore the biggest issue is the agreement of grace with freedom. Augustine establishes three fundamental principles in this regard.

The first principle states that God is the absolute master and, through His grace, “determines” all wills. God's absolute sovereignty over wills Augustine opposes to the Pelagian principle of total empowerment of freedom. Augustine establishes the influence of God's omnipotence in the order of virtue and in the order of truth. God, the first cause, is the author of good, of moral perfection. No man is

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¹ E. Portalié (1931). „Saint Augustin”, in A.Vacant et al. (eds.), *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*. Paris: Letouzey et Ané, cols. 2384-2392.

good or virtuous without God's gift called grace, and he is named in this way precisely because it is entirely free. A will, no matter how saint and elevated, falls unless God protects it. We find three laws regarding the exercise of divine sovereignty:

- the first one says that any good act, without exception, is the fruit of grace without which no one deserves heaven;

- the second one establishes grace's priority on good will. Grace is not an answer to faith or prayer; it precedes, prepares, supports and strengthens will in good's action; it is absolutely free and cannot be deducted from any human reason². Real grace, if it is not free, it is no longer grace either. Grace is *irresistible* (man's will can not be opposed), is *active* (admonitory or operant, acts without our participation or even against our will; it is the beginning of good in us, but without the cooperation of human will) and *cooperative* (acts with the contest of energetic will of man and recognizes his free activity);

- the third law takes into consideration the Pelagian impeccability about which it can be said it is possible especially in the absence of grace. Augustine says that nothing is possible without the contest of grace and that all people, even the saints, are wrong. Augustine's severity is here excessive and goes as far as denying the fact that the correct ones, even assisted by grace, would live without sin. Grace is a very rare privilege and, when asked why does not God use the grace for all so that He does not allow some of them to be lost, Augustine confesses that he cannot answer³.

The conclusion: God's sovereignty is stated and it is absolute. How long and how much is the extension of this dependence of man in relation to the sovereignty of God? Pelagius will say that man's freedom is absolute, therefore grace is not necessary. Augustine will say that freedom is of no use to man if it is without God. Freedom depends on God in every moment of its exercise. Here Augustine distinguishes between two types of grace. On the one hand, we have *the grace of natural virtues* (a simple given of the providence and which prepares for will the grounds for action), and then we have *the*

² Augustine, *Enchiridion ad Laurentium*, 28, 107: *Gratia vero nisi gratis est gratia non est*; with reference to *Romans 11:6 Si autem gratia, jam non ex operibus: alioquin gratia jam non est gratia* ("And if it is by means of grace, then it is not by means of facts; otherwise, grace would no longer be grace. And if it is by means of facts, it is no longer by means of grace; otherwise, fact would no longer be fact").

³ Eduard Ferent (1997). *Antropologia creștină [Christian Anthropology]*. Iași: „Presa Bună” Publishing House, p. 147.

grace of saving and supernatural acts (it is the grace of sons – *gratia filiorum*). The first type belongs to everyone, even to pagans (*fili concubinarum*), and Augustine, speaking about the courageous death of a heretic, he says that this kind of death is a gift of God.

The second principle states that, under the action of grace, as well as in its absence, man remains free. The freedom, even under the action of efficient grace, is always defended by Augustine. Exegesis agrees on two things:

- Augustine defends free will against the Manicheans;
- in the fight with the Pelagians, Augustine seizes the danger of compromising freedom by exalting grace.

It was said that, driven by the logic of his ideas, Augustine sacrificed freedom for the benefit of divine determinism. His texts are, however, contrary to this allegation. Three aspects are worth being noticed here.

First of all, the fact that Augustine never retracts his theories on human freedom and on the plenitude of man to choose or to self-determine. He does not reproach to Pelagians of asking the power to choose, he even proclaims with them that, without this power, the responsibility would be canceled. God cannot command a constrained will, and the fact that He commands shows that man's will is free. Also, the exigency of command is not satisfying the impossible; on the contrary, by means of God's commandment it prevents man from doing only what he can and to beg for what he cannot do. Julian the Pelagian conceives free will as a balance in equilibrium. Augustine protests: this balance existed in Adam, but the balance was broken through sin. The will must fight against the inclination towards evil, but it remains, however, the mistress of choice, and freedom is preserved, even if it is no longer identical to the freedom Adam used to enjoy by means of the privilege of the original integrity.

Secondly, in all anti-Pelagian works⁴, Augustine proclaims positively the complete power of choice. He is not a determinist towards the end of life. Three years before his death, he was saying that anyone receives the efficient grace (active, operant) through Faith, receives it since his will is entirely independent (*sua id facere voluntate ac libero arbitrio*).

⁴ Especially in *Contra Iulianum haeresis Pelagianae defensorem, Contra Iulianum opus imperfectum, De gestis Pelagii, De gratia Christi et de peccato originali contra Pelagium*.

Thirdly, efficient grace operates in an infallible manner, but never by means of an irresistible impulse. Under the action of grace, the will shall remain its own master. Faith and will “are in our power, because they are not made unless we want to”⁵.

The third principle is subordinated to Augustine’s attempt to reconcile the action of grace with freedom and to show that between the first two principles there is no contradiction. Therefore, the grace that involves the adherence in will is accurately adapted to the subject’s provisions intended by God. What does Augustine say?

First of all, that will is never decided without a reason, without being attracted by something good perceived in the object⁶.

Then Augustine notices a universal truth: man is not and cannot be the master of his first thoughts. He can influence, undoubtedly, the course of reflection, but he himself cannot determine the objects, the images and, therefore, the reasons for which they appear in front of his spirit. Who determines them in this case? Not destiny, because destiny is just a word, but God will.

Finally, God can, if He desires, to save Judas or to let Peter be lost, but He does not want. He alone decides whether will shall be decided for better or for worse. And now the problem re-appears: is Augustine a fatalist? Is he a Manichean? No, and here are the evidences, at least four groups of evidence:

1. Simplicianus asks Augustine about how it must be understood the Chapter IX of *Romans* regarding the predestination about Jacob and Esau⁷. Augustine, in his response, determines first the thought of Saint Paul: good will comes from grace, from a grace so sure in its results that human freedom never resists to it. Then he states that this effective grace is not necessary for us to be able to choose well, but because without it we cannot choose in any way. The difficulty that arises is the following: how is the power to resist grace granted with the absolute certainty of the result? Here is Augustine's answer: there are several

⁵ Augustine, *Retractationes*, I, 23, 3.

⁶ Idem, *De libero arbitrio*, III, 25, 74. *Sed quia voluntatem non allicit ad faciendum*.

⁷ Idem, *De diversis quaestionibus ad Simplicianum*, I, 2, 1; 2, 8 (*Quomodo iusta reprobatio Esau*), II, 2 (*Praescientia an proprie sit in Deo. Scientia quid, et quomodo in Deo. Ira, misericordia, et zelus Dei, quo sensu dicitur*). In *Romans* 9, 11. 13 we read: “And since they are not yet born and since they do not do something good or bad, in order to remain God’s will the one after the choice, not from facts, but from the one Who is calling”; As it is written: “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated”.

ways to call to faith. God knows which call will be agreed and which one will be rejected. For this reason, they are selected only those whom God reserves an effective call, though God could convert them all. In the chosen ones, grace is manifested in an irresistible manner;

2. He returns to this issue⁸ and will say that all good acts come from God, but freedom remains intact, for only the consent makes the will;

3. Augustine returns always, towards the end of life, in *De dono perseverentiae* and *De praedestinatione sanctorum*, to the foreknowledge of God that precedes predestination. The divine inspiration allows freedom to consent or rejection and by means of divine foreknowledge are examined the effects that grace will produce. God's foreknowledge does not predetermine. Augustine then distinguishes two kinds of faith: *credere Deo aut Christo* (obedience to the word of God) and *credere in Deum aut Christum* (believing in God and in Christ). The first is an intellectual acceptance of God, without hope and without love; the second one is personal communion established by grace (love). Only this form of faith justifies and grace, in this case, involves the gift of perseverance and is all-irresistible. I.e., God does not forgive sins incompletely, when He does it, but totally and completely;

4. Starting from a place of *Proverbs* (8, 35), Augustine speaks of *praeparatur voluntas a Deo* and, in this preparation, the soul remains master to himself. This also explains why between two people equally tempted, one resists, the other does not. How can we explain this fact, Augustine asks, other than by the free choice of their wills? It is obviously that God may suggest one reason or another to man's will in order to act and that He knows the answer that the will that goes freely to acting shall give. But not the reason of God's science (prescience) determines man to choose what he chose; man chooses since he is free to do so. We ourselves are not anything but will⁹ and this principle is opposed to any kind of determinism. Will contains freedom in its very notion, for where there is no will of its own, then there is no will of any kind. The fact that free will has its cause in God does not make it any less free and precisely free it has been created. A will determined in good cannot be able to sin and the very existence of sin is the evidence of the absolute freedom of will.

⁸ Idem, *De spiritu et littera*, cap. 34, 60: *sed consentire vel dissentire propriae voluntatis est.*

⁹ Idem, *De civitate Dei*, XIV, 6: *voluntas est quippe in omnibus, immo omnes nihil aliud quam voluntates sunt.*

One last remark: the will of man is not an effect but a cause, a cause of all human actions. The fundament of the concept of freedom is that freedom is nothing unless it is our own way of being. “Wishing”, “having” means to develop an activity that no one else can put into practice for us and instead of us. We are nothing else but will. This notion of freedom does not, however, imply the good-evil opposition. We must distinguish between this general freedom and the freedom to choose between virtue and vice. The first one of these freedoms belongs to all that determines itself, to everything that has in itself the principle of its own movement. The second one we find only in man. Augustine recognizes the freedom that can sin, as it can not sin, and also recognizes the will that can not sin in any way¹⁰. The last one occurs to him naturally as more perfect, for it is the freedom that we share *with* and *from* God and of which we enjoy if we persevere in virtue and piety. Our freedom in good is limited to obeying God. Evil is what rational creature does not conserve in the good it received from God, evil is privation of being, corruption of our nature (*amissio boni; privatio boni*).

In conclusion: God has endowed me with free will; if I have sinned, I am the one who sinned (*si peccavi, ego peccavi*). The true disciple of Christ is the one that approaches Christ not to understand what he wants, but to have what he understands.

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¹⁰ Idem, *De correptione et gratia*, 12, 33: *prima ergo libertas voluntatis erat, posse non peccare; novissima erit multo maior, non posse mori.*

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