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“My God, the humble Jesus” (Conf. 7.18.24)
A Reading of De doctrina christiana in dialogue with Paul Ricoeur’s
hermeneutics

In what follows I will present an interpretation of Saint Augustine’s *De doctrina christiana* in conversation with Paul Ricoeur’s philosophical hermeneutics. In order to do so, I will divide the essay in three sections. First, I will briefly examine Ricoeur’s conception of religious language, paying particular attention to his account of the Bible. Second, I will interpret Augustine’s scriptural hermeneutics in *De doctrina christiana* focused in his understanding of what we can call God’s rhetoric. Finally, I will conclude with a balance of both positions defending the fruitfulness of their dialogue, but also the uniqueness of Augustine’s exegesis.

§1: The Specificity of Biblical Language

Unfortunately, I cannot present a systematic account of Ricoeur’s religious thought¹, yet it is possible to highlight some features of it in order to connect them to Augustine’s biblical exegesis. For this purpose, “Philosophy and Religious Language” (1974)² is probably the best place to start. In this essay Ricoeur criticizes the linguistic method’s approach to the study of religion. For him, “linguistic analysis is [...] heavily determined by the history of the principles of verification and falsification” (PRL, 36) and, therefore, its conception of truth is too narrow³. Philosophical hermeneutics pretends something different, namely,

¹ Cyril O’Regan develops a very interesting and sophisticated interpretation of Ricoeur’s thought (in association to Tracy’s hermeneutical theology) in “*De doctrina christiana* and Modern Hermeneutics”, in Duane Arnold and Pamela Bright (eds.) *De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture* (Notre Dame & London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). However, O’Regan is not interested in a reading of Augustine’s book *per se* (no single footnote of the 62 refer to Augustine and there are just two direct references to the book —on pages 227 and 236— in the whole body of the essay), but in a meta-philosophical discussion about its connections and differences with the hermeneutical approaches of Hans Frei and the Ricoeur-Tracy axis. Nevertheless, other features of O’Regan’s paper will be very helpful for this essay.

² The essay is included in Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). From now on, PRL followed by page number.

³ In O’Regan’s words, this kind of reasoning is subsidiary of “the positivist manifestation of the general Enlightenment credo that religious texts in general, the biblical text in particular,

“to get as close as possible to the most *originary* expressions of a community of faith, to those expressions through which the members of this community have interpreted their experience [...]” (PRL, 37). The relevant point here is that those “expressions” are precisely *embodied* in language, “modes of discourse as narratives, prophecies, legislative texts, proverbs and wisdom sayings, hymns, prayers, and liturgical formulas. These are the ordinary expressions of religious faith” (PRL, 37)⁴. This assertion is crucial. As we will see in Augustine, one of the most beautiful and paradoxical features of God’s love is precisely his embodiment in the ordinary. For both Ricoeur and the Bishop of Hippo, this is the fundamental mark of Christian religious language⁵.

Few lines after these assertions, Ricoeur adds some very relevant precisions: “[...] if hermeneutics is always an attempt to overcome the distance, it has to use distancing as both an obstacle and the instrument in order to reenact the initial event of discourse in a new event of discourse that will claim to be both faithful and creative” (PRL, 38). The author’s attempt here is to show that any linguistic articulation of an event implies a process of distancing from it. However, the distance has a dialectical role: it hinders our attempt to transform the religious mystery in a mere object of knowledge but, at the same time, it allows us to imperfectly grasp the original event by reenacting it⁶. In this regard,

answer to rational protocols [...]”. For him, this kind of reasoning represents a “category mistake” (*De doctrina christiana* and *Modern Hermeneutics*”, 219).

⁴ See also his comments on parables in “Manifestation and Proclamation”, in: Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred*, 59 ff.

⁵ In “Manifestation and Proclamation”, for instance, writing about the differences of the religions of the sacred and the religions of the book the author maintains that the “emergence of the word from the numinous is [...] the primordial trait that rules all the differences between the two poles of the religious. [...]. A theology of the Name is opposed to a hierophany of an idol. [...]. To meditate on the commandments wins out over venerating idols” (56). According to the author, this emergence of the word implies an uprooting that shakes up “what we called the logic of the sacred and its system of correspondences. [...]. [The] new logic is the logic of limit-expressions” (57). Ricoeur’s point is, in some sense, close to Augustine’s: Scripture’s genres represent the way in which God’s rhetoric elicits limit-questions that challenge our worldviews. Now, in order to do so, it is essential to retain the dialectical relation between manifestation and proclamation, i.e., to recognize that the linguistic expression (proclamation) of God’s *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (manifestation) implies a distancing from it. For Ricoeur, this is the essence of the logic of revelation.

⁶ In fact, according to David Tracy’s theory of the classic, the effort of reenacting a classic generates new ones. For instance, the religious classic of Christianity is the Christ-event, but the Pauline articulation of the event is also a classical way to approach ourselves to the mystery of Christ’s birth, death, and resurrection. See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 258.

liturgy is fundamental⁷. According to Ricoeur, this dialectic of veiling and unveiling the truth of the event⁸ is the essence of religious language⁹.

For these reasons, Ricoeur maintains that the rhetorical role of narrative in the Scriptural context cannot be disassociated from the content it carries. “It seems, on the contrary, that something specific, something unique, is said about Yahweh and about Yahweh’s relations with the people of Israel because it is said in the form of a narrative [...]” (PRL, 40). The relation, therefore, is not accidental. God reveals himself *through* language. Accordingly, the hermeneutical task is to interpret “the sort of being-in-the-world unfolded in front of the text” (PRL, 43). This is a major theological claim; its spiritual consequences, nonetheless, are not developed by Ricoeur, but for Augustine: in the Bible, this mode of being-in-the-world is properly understood as conversion¹⁰.

Let me finish this section with a final comment based on Ricoeur’s understanding of the word “Christ”. His account will help us in order to connect even more properly his philosophical hermeneutics with *De doctrina christiana*. I quote *in extenso*:

To understand the word “God” is to follow the direction of the meaning of the word. By the direction of the meaning I mean its double power to gather all the significations that issue from the partial discourses and to open up a horizon that escapes from the closure of discourse.

⁷ See, for example, Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 18 ff., when he writes about the unwritten tradition. Also, Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999), 79

⁸ Evidently, this is a Heideggerian motif; however, it is also present in Augustine’s thought. O’Regan explains this with particular clarity: “The specific motor for the condensation in Augustine, it might be argued, is the fact that no language, not even biblical language, fully captures God (DDC 1.6 ff.), since even biblical language is an accommodation. Thus, if Augustine is, unlike Frei, prepared to associate truth and reference, this is not to say that reference functions in the kind of straightforward way it does on the empirical level. God, as the truth, sustains biblical language, while at the same time resisting capture in language’s referential function” (“*De doctrina christiana* and Modern Hermeneutics”, 227).

⁹ In this regard, the variety of modes of discourse in the Bible is crucial. For Ricoeur, “the God-referent is at once the coordinator of these varied discourses and the index of their incompleteness, the point at which something escapes them” (PRL, 45).

¹⁰ Yet, Ricoeur maintains that biblical texts “offer modes of redescribing life” (PRL, 43). He also writes: “[...] the Bible is revealed to the extent that the new being unfolded there is itself revelatory with respect to the world, to all reality, including my existence and my history” (PRL, 44). I take this as a more general way to talk about conversion.

I would say the same thing about the word “Christ”. To the double function that I have described for the word “God”, this word “Christ” adds the power of incarnating all the religious significations in a fundamental symbol, the symbol of a sacrificial love, of a love stronger than death. It is the function of the preaching of the cross and resurrection to give to the word “God” a *density* that the word “being” does not possess. In its meaning is contained the notion of *its* relation to us as gracious and of our relation to it as “ultimately concerned” and as fully “recognizant” of it (PRL, 46).

The sacrificial love of Christ unites all the possibilities articulated by the various modes of religious discourse in the most paradoxical way. Everything is one and at once in the love of God self-manifested in Jesus, the Christ. The mystery of God is incarnated in the humble Jesus: the humble baby, the modest carpenter, the lowly God that becomes man, becomes language, becomes finitude. This is the sweetness of God’s love expressed in Scripture¹¹. Saint Augustine accurately understood this beautiful paradox of love in his *De doctrina*¹², let us now turn to it in order to see his particular interpretation of the problem.

§2: On How to Teach God’s Sweetness

Likewise Ricoeur’s case, it is not possible to give an exhaustive account of Augustine’s biblical hermeneutics here, not even reducing the scope to just *De doctrina*. Nevertheless, it is possible to capture the essence of the text if we focus in some key passages of this classic.

¹¹ For an interesting disquisition on the role of Jesus’ humanity in Augustine’s thought, see Michael Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere: Augustine’s Early Figurative Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 228 ff. Cameron’s point is that, even though Augustine seems to suggest that the love for Jesus humanity is just transitional, in fact he is trying to show how Jesus’ humanity is inseparable from his divinity and, therefore, both together represent the collapse of any ordinary system of reference.

¹² According to Cameron, *De doctrina* “made two permanent contributions to western Christian discourse on Scripture: it anchored its interpretative center in the double command to love God and the neighbor, and it inseminated Christian Scripture reading with a literary-rhetorical and spiritual-philosophical outlook on language as a network of signs” (Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere*, 217). Following John Cavadini (“The Sweetness of the Word: Salvation and Rhetoric in Augustine’s *De doctrina christiana*”, in: Arnold and Bright, *De doctrina christiana: A Classic of Western Culture*), I have tried to articulate these two contributions with the expression “God’s rhetoric of love”.

In many ways, *De doctrina*¹³ is a book about rhetoric¹⁴. Yet, properly speaking, this is not a book focused in human rhetoric, but in a divine one. Or, even more accurately, Augustine's book is a treatise on a divine rhetoric that is manifested in human words. For this very reason, as in Ricoeur's hermeneutic, the theme of mystery reappears: the fullness of God's self-revelation is always hidden in Scripture and this is not an accident, but something essential to the dynamic of revelation (see DDC, II.6.7-6.8): in the Bible, truth is fully revealed and, at the same time, hidden. O'Regan explains this point accurately:

Truth, Augustine wishes to say, is already fully constituted in the biblical text. It is, in a manner of speaking, already event. Appropriation is not in any way constitutive of the truth, simply of the human entry into the truth, which truth may or may not be seen, may or may not be appropriated. But even if seen, there is no automatic guarantee of appropriation, for perversity is always and everywhere a possibility"¹⁵.

This situation is clear, for instance, in the Preface. According to Augustine some complain about his exegetical rules because they do not understand them; others, understanding the rules, argue that they do not "clear up the point they wish cleared up"; others maintain that they knowledge of Scripture is accurate enough and, therefore, they reject the rules of interpretation as useless (DDC, Preface, 2). Augustine answer to the objectors announces from the very beginning the core of his hermeneutics:

[...] give up blaming me, and pray instead that God would grant [you] the sight of [your] eyes. For though I can move my finger to point out an object, it is out of my power to open men's eyes that they may see either the fact that I am pointing, or the object at which I point (DDC, Preface, 2).

¹³ Saint Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, in: Philip Schaff (ed.) *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 2, translated by James Shaw (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing, 1887). From now on DDC followed by chapter and paragraph number.

¹⁴ For Cavadini, "what we have in [*De doctrina*'s] book 4 is less a theory of rhetoric *per se* than a theory of conversion. The art of rhetoric is useful not so much in its particular rules but precisely because it embodies a science of human motivation and therefore helps us to learn what will make the truth not only true but *moving*. [...]. In particular, if the truth is to be moving, it must be presented *suaviter* —sweetly— i.e., in such way that it will delight the listener" (Cavadini, "The Sweetness of the Word", 164-165). In the context of his comparison between *De doctrina* and *On Instructing Beginners*, Cameron makes the same point: "teachers must first tell Scripture's love-forming stories so that hearers 'by listening may believe, by believing may hope, and by hoping may love (*Instr. Beg.* 4.8)" (Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere*, 241). I am, basically, following these interpretations in the essay.

¹⁵ O'Regan, "*De doctrina christiana* and Modern Hermeneutics", 233.

In the end, likewise Origen's hermeneutics¹⁶, the most relevant thing is prayer¹⁷. The rules of interpretation work as an aid to see, but "to see" in the Bible means to be able to encounter the Lord through the mediation of the text and that is something that never occurs due to our interpretative talent, but as a gift from above (DDC, Preface, 8). Therefore, to "understand" Scripture implies a humble experience of learning that goes beyond techniques of interpretation: what it is at play is our whole disposition towards God. For this reason, although Augustine insists in the pedagogical role of the rules; he believes that what matters is the personal turn to God: we need to be able to read for ourselves because the goal is not to be followers of Augustine's method, but followers of the Lord (DDC, Preface, 9). The point is to recognize God's *ordo amoris*¹⁸ and to place ourselves in it. Revelation implies mediation and mediation —*through* the Word—is God's most powerful sign of love.

¹⁶ In the *First Principles*, for instance, Origen claims that Scripture cannot be called into question "because the weakness of our understanding is not strong enough to discover in each verse the obscure and hidden meanings". In fact, the very dynamic of Scriptural revelation hinders that attempt "the treasure of divine meanings is confined, shut up within the frail vessel of the common letter", see *An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, First Principles: Book IV, Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs, Homily XXVII on Numbers*, translation and introduction by Rowan A. Greer (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 177 and 202, respectively. Therefore, this situation cannot be resolved by means of human capacities, but as a consequence of God's mercy. A clear example of this situation is presented in the *Homilies on Joshua*, particularly in Homily Eight: "We plead with you, O hearers of the sacred rolls, not to hear with disgust or distaste those things that are read because the narration of them seems to be less pleasant. For you ought to know that those things that are read are indeed worthy of the utterance of the Holy Spirit, *but in order to explain them we need the grace of the Holy Spirit [...]*", see *Homilies on Joshua*, translated by Barbara J. Bruce (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002), VIII, 1.

¹⁷ For this very reason, Augustine's interpretative method starts with the fear of God: "Now this fear will of necessity excite in us the thought of our mortality and of the death that is before us, and crucify all the motions of pride as if our flesh were nailed to the tree" (DDC, II.7.9). A hermeneutic of prayer must be nailed to the cross in order to recognize with open heart our own finitude but, even more important, to recognize how God's rhetoric of love is incarnated in finitude and suffering. The most fruitful hermeneutical effort does not consist in understanding obscure sentences; rather, it consists in contemplating the paradox of a God that dies in a cross. This is why Book III's conclusive paragraph returns to its starting point, namely, fear of God, prayer: "I have just finished speaking of as much as I thought enough, students of these venerable documents ought to be counselled not only to make themselves acquainted with the forms of expression ordinarily used in Scripture, to observe them carefully, and to remember them accurately, but also, *what is especially and before all things necessary, to pray that they may understand them*" (DDC, III.37.56, my emphasis).

¹⁸ David Fagerberg, in the context of his comments on liturgical asceticism, writes: "Virtue has been called *ordo amoris*—rightly ordered love—and liturgical asceticism is the process of overcoming disordered love by restoring in our hearts the hierarchy designed by God, who is Love", see *On Liturgical Asceticism* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 32. In one sense, all *De doctrina* is an attempt to recover the rightly ordered love.

Mediation is a basic category to understand *De doctrina*. Augustine's comments on signs and things show this point clearly. The aim of this Church Father is not the development of some sort of philosophical treatise about signs. What Augustine is trying to do is to present an economy of signification insofar as it can be conceived as an economy of love: *De doctrina* is teaching us the proper referent of our love, God.

In this sense, Augustine claims that we should distinguish between the use and the enjoyment of things: "For to enjoy a thing is to rest with satisfaction in it for its own sake. To use, on the other hand, is to employ whatever means are at one's disposal to obtain what one desires, if it is a proper object of desire; for an unlawful use ought rather to be called an abuse" (DDC, I.4.4). Few lines after he articulates this claim in a more theological fashion:

We have wandered far from God; and if we wish to return to our Father's home, this world must be used, not enjoyed, that so the invisible things of God may be clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, that is, that *by means of what is material and temporary we may lay hold upon that which is spiritual and eternal* (DDC, I.4.4, my emphasis).

In the end, as Cavadini maintains, this is a treatise about conversion. All the refined remarks on signs and things are only there to show us the right orientation of our love (see also Conf. XIII.9.10). In order to love as God invites us to do it; we need the courage to love God even to the extreme of surrendering what we love most, even our families, our friends, ourselves. The paradox, however, is that by means of this surrendering we recover the true meaning of love. Orienting ourselves to God —"the true object of enjoyment" (DDC, I.5.5) who "excels in dignity all other objects" (DDC, I.7.7) — allows us to truly love ourselves and the others¹⁹.

Now, as Ricoeur pointed out, this economy of signification is grounded in God's self-sacrificial love manifested in Jesus Christ. Therefore, to put ourselves aside is not some sort of absurd request from above, it is the most sublime way to be aligned in God's *ordo amoris*: Jesus is the incarnation of God's love, he is

¹⁹ For an important study of this dialectic of humiliation and exaltation, see Jon Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993).

God's self-emptying. If we are *imago Dei*, then, we should participate in this kind of love. Yet, this is not a simple matter of personal decision. As said before, God's economy is based in the gift of his love. Not in vain Augustine is known as the Doctor of Grace.

All this is manifested in Jesus' birth, death and resurrection, but is also expressed in a very subtle manner in the fact of God's language-based manifestation. As Augustine recalls, God is by principle ineffable; "yet God, although nothing worthy of His greatness can be said of Him, has condescended to accept the worship of men's mouths, and has desired us through the medium of our own words to rejoice in His praise" (DDC, I.6.6). Surely, God's incarnation is itself paradoxical, but there is a particular subtlety in his linguistic incarnation. The ability to recognize God in the Bible, therefore, requires a singular disposition of the soul, a particular capacity of wonder, a specific openness to mystery. Nonetheless, again, this is not, primarily, a consequence of our will: this is God's gift.

The sublime rhetoric of God's love is perfectly expressed in the following passage of *De doctrina*:

But of this we should have been wholly incapable, had not Wisdom condescended to *adapt Himself to our weakness*, and to *show us a pattern of holy life in the form of our own humanity*. Yet, since we when we come to Him do wisely, He when He came to us was considered by proud men to have done very foolishly. And since we when we come to Him become strong, He when He came to us was looked upon as weak. But the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men. And thus, though Wisdom was Himself our home, He made Himself also the way by which we should reach our home (DDC, I.11.11, my emphases).

In this excerpt Augustine offers a refined and beautiful account of the problem. He clearly expresses the paradox of God's love, the absurdity—from a human perspective— of the weakness of God²⁰. God's love subverts all human categories and challenges our understanding of life by means of his incarnation. However, there is an even more delicate element in this passage, also present in

²⁰ It is interesting to note that this Pauline claim, among others, helped John D. Caputo to articulate his theology of the event, see *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006), particularly chapter two, "St. Paul on the Logos of the Cross".

the rest of *De doctrina*, namely, the incarnation of God's love in language. It is not a minor detail, I believe, that the reference to 1Cor. 1:25 is not explicit. As well as in the case of other Church Fathers, profane and sacred languages are interconnected fertilizing each other. In a way, one could say, Augustine's book is reproducing God's cosmological rhetoric of love: the Word (Jesus Christ) incarnates in the insignificance of our world; likewise, the Word (Scripture) incarnates in the insignificance of Augustine's rules of interpretation. Text and person are inseparable here. This is the sublime subtleness of *De doctrina* which imperfectly reproduces the sublime subtleness of God's rhetoric of love²¹.

Accordingly, the rules of interpretation of Scripture must reproduce this model. Augustine knows that and, therefore, summarizes his hermeneutic of the Bible as follows:

Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought (DDC, I.36.40)²².

God's economy of love is unmistakably recapitulated here. The interpretation of Scripture, as well as our own lives, must be aligned with the hermeneutical principle of charity. To understand the Bible is not a matter of

²¹ From a more specifically rhetorical perspective, Cavadini writes: "The Wisdom of God comes to us not from place to place but by appearing in mortal flesh. She who is the goal has become the way, but this way consists of 'unblocking' our affections: like the rhetor, God's Word speaks not only wisely (and indeed is Wisdom herself) but movingly, and in some sense, sweetly: this is the 'foolishness of preaching'. The Word made flesh is God's Wisdom made not simply visible but persuasive; it is God's eloquence" (Cavadini, "The Sweetness of the Word", 166).

²² The "hermeneutical principle of charity" is also presented in other sections of *De doctrina* as well as in the *Confessions*. In the case of the former, see for instance DDC, III.10.14 ("Whatever there is in the word of God that cannot, when taken literally, be referred either to purity of life or soundness of doctrine, you may set down as figurative. Purity of life has reference to the love of God and one's neighbor; soundness of doctrine to the knowledge of God and one's neighbor") and DDC, III.10.15-16 (Now Scripture enjoins nothing except charity, and condemns nothing except lust, and in that way fashions the lives of men. [...] I mean by charity that affection of the mind which aims at the enjoyment of God for His own sake, and the enjoyment of one's self and one's neighbor in subordination to God; by lust I mean that affection of the mind which aims at enjoying one's self and one's neighbor, and other corporeal things, without reference to God"). In the context of *Confessions*, see for example Conf. XII.25.35 ("Let us not, then, be puffed up for one against the other, above that which is written; let us love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind, and our neighbor as ourself. As to which two precepts of charity, unless we believe that Moses meant whatever in these books he did mean, we shall make God a liar when we think otherwise concerning our fellow-servants' mind than He has taught us").

theories of interpretation —though theories always help—; it is, in contrast, a matter of openness to the gift of God’s self-emptying in Jesus Christ, the Word. The purpose of Scripture, as well as *De doctrina*’s aim, is to help us to align ourselves with God’s self-sacrificial love. In the end, both cases pursue just one goal, namely, our conversion²³.

§3: Conclusion

I will like to present some final considerations after this brief analysis of *De doctrina*. First, I believe that the connections with Ricoeur’s work are significant enough to defend that a dialogue between both texts is a fruitful one. I have tried to share some of those fruits in this essay. Despite the fact that Augustine’s understanding of truth is probably more connected to Plato and Aristotle, his deep understanding of Scripture helped him in order to notice the richness of a less correspondentist analysis. *De doctrina* shows clearly how convinced was Augustine about the fact that the mystery of God’s love cannot be fully apprehended by our human capacities. In this sense, the Bishop of Hippo is very close to Ricoeur’s biblical hermeneutic. Or, putted in a different way, given these considerations it is easier to see how Ricoeur’s thought could offer illuminating conceptual tools to disclose new elements of the richness of Augustine’s exegesis.

However, there is a uniqueness in Augustine’s thought that is not present even in an exceptionally refined interpreter like Ricoeur. The French scholar tries to grasp the philosophical meaning of religious language with a subtleness unusual in the philosophical domain; yet, I believe that his philosophical *epoche* limits his attempt. In the end, the Bible is surely a text that can be interpreted philosophically; but its core is a person (Conf. VII.17.23), not only a referent or an intentional object. The core of Scripture is the humble Jesus, our God. The Bible, therefore, is a *locus*, a point of encounter with the Lord. It is also a call for conversion. Ricoeur timidly affirms all this; but Augustine theological insights and profound life of faith enrich his hermeneutical effort in a way not totally present in Ricoeur’s thought. Augustine discloses the meaning of Scripture

²³ Cavadini perfectly summarizes this idea: “Charity, as it were, deconstructs those sweetnesses [which trap us in things], dismantling them in the ultimate sign (*signum*), the sign of the cross” (Cavadini, “The Sweetness of the Word”, 171).

presenting to the reader the sweetness of God's love. He acknowledges the importance of method and study, but he recognizes that above all, reading Scripture is a matter of faith and prayer. This is the only true biblical hermeneutic, the only way to understand the mystery of God's rhetoric of love.