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Saint Augustine, the First Catholic Psychologist*  

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In 1930 there occurred the fifteenth centenary of the death of St. Augustine, the prophet of personality and the first Catholic psychologist. I present for your consideration some reflections upon this aspect of his thought with the hope that it may serve to send some of you to his writings, which you will find to be a source not only of intellectual interest but also of spiritual enrichment.

If St. Augustine may properly be called the first Catholic psychologist, there must be something which is entitled to be known as Catholic psychology, by which I mean a psychology that is not hostile to the beliefs of Catholics. No one, I suppose, would think of speaking of Catholic physics or Catholic chemistry or Catholic astronomy, for the obvious reason that these sciences have to do with inanimate nature with which Catholicism, as such, has no concern, so long as they confine themselves to their proper business and do not attempt to pre-empt the field of philosophy. But with psychology the situation is altogether different, for psychology, and especially medical psychology, may and often does touch most intimately the religious beliefs and practices of Catholics. To illustrate my meaning let me cite a recent experience. A few weeks ago a young Catholic girl came to consult me professionally and related the following story. She had been under the care of a physician to whom she confided that she was praying that God might help her in her difficulties and perplexities. To this revelation of her faith in prayer he replied facetiously that there is no reason to believe in the existence of God and that, even if there were, there is no assurance that her prayers would be of any avail. Now I suppose that this sort of thing would be of no particular concern to some of our young intellectual revolutionaries, for whom religion is an exploded superstition, but to a Catholic patient it is of very vital concern inasmuch as it may lead, as it did in this instance, to something pernicious. As Catholic physicians we are, as indeed we should be, interested in acquainting ourselves with the doctrines of any and of every school of psychology, but when it comes to treating and advising our patients we have certain inescapable duties. The beliefs we hold as to the nature of man, his origin and his destiny, must of necessity influence our practical attitudes toward the patients who consult us. Every physician, whether he intends it or
not, must be a psychologist of some sort and the value to him of psychology with a Catholic background is precisely that it protects him from pagan psychologies, just as Christian ethics will protect him from evolutionary ethics. It is simply impossible to be a Catholic physician and at the same time a pagan psychologist. If we believe a man to be no more than a kind of higher animal, our advice will be colored by that belief; if, on the other hand, we believe that man is a unique being endowed with an immortal soul and made in the image and likeness of God, then we can have no converse with much that is to be found in contemporary psychologies. If we are Freudians we must give our adherence to the philosophy of naturalism; if we are Catholics we are committed to a system of supernaturalism. We cannot be both. However useful we may find some of the empirical observations of the new psychologists we shall not be misled by any psychology which, whether it knows it or not, is based upon materialism, determinism and hedonism, and which teaches that religion is a mere mirage, an illusion and no more than a projection of man’s subjective libido. We shall not mind being called mediaevalists and shall bear with fortitude the imputation that we are so little modern and up-to-date that we do not swallow without criticism the pagan doctrines introduced again to Europe with the Renaissance—doctrines which have inevitably landed us in our contemporary social, economic and political chaos.

Again, as Catholic physicians we shall know how to value at its true worth much of our present-day popular psychology. And here let me quote for you some words of Professor A. E. Taylor of Edinburgh set forth in his recent Gifford Lectures, “The Faith of a Moralist.”

“For our purpose,” he says, “the thought of great makers of literature who have been also great readers of the human heart may be much more important than the speculations of the professed metaphysician or psychologist. In particular, I venture, at my own peril, to think that the popular estimate of the authority attaching to the deliverances of the psychologist by profession in matters of morals and religion is grossly exaggerated, probably in consequence of an elementary fallacy of confusion. The psychologist, manufacturing, on the basis of his laboratory experiments, an artificial schema of the human mind, is too often confused with a very different person, the reader of individual human character. We all of us probably know able psychologists whose verdicts on character or interpretations of motive we should never dream of trusting in an affair of any practical moment, and must certainly know many a man whose judgments of his fellows and insight into the possibilities of life we should accept as highly authoritative, though we are well aware that he knows nothing of the highly abstract science of psychology, and would very possibly be merely puzzled if he tried to study it. When we wish to confirm or correct our reading of human life, it may safely be said, we do not commonly think of turning in the first instance to the works of the metaphysician or psychologist, or, if we do, the metaphysician or psychologist whose view of life we trust is trusted because
he is something more than a specialist in metaphysics or psychology. We all attach great weight to Shakespeare's interpretation of human life, or Dante's, or Paschal's, or Wordsworth's; even when we reject their testimony, we at least do not reject it lightly. I believe it is safe to say that Plato is the only metaphysician to whose verdicts on things human we ascribe anything like this significance, and the reason is manifest. It is that Plato was so much more than the author of a philosophical theory; he was one of the world's supreme dramatists, with the great dramatist's insight into a vast range of human character and experience, an insight only possible to a nature quickly and richly responsive to a world of suggestion which narrower natures of the specialist type miss. If I am found in the sequel appealing to the testimony of 'moralists' I trust it will be understood that by moralists I do not mean primarily men who have devoted themselves to the elaboration of ethical systems, the Aristotles, or even the Kants, but men who have lived richly and deeply and thought as well as lived, the Platos, Augustines, Dostoevskys and their fellows."

To St. Augustine, the first Catholic psychologist, one of the world's great masters of rich and deep life and thought, I would direct your attention tonight.

Let me sketch briefly the main incidents of his life that we may visualize what manner of man he was. He was born in 354 at the African town of Tagaste, some fifty miles from the Algerian coast, and was probably of Berber blood. His father Patricius was a pagan, a good enough type of Romanized African. He belonged to the order of Decuriones, to the "very brilliant urban council of Tagaste" (splendidissimus ordo Thagastensis), as an inscription at Souk-Ahras put it. He owned vineyards and orchards and at the time of Augustine's birth lived probably in comfortable circumstances. His mother was that saintly Monica whose prayers and tears were to exercise such a paramount influence over the life of her son. Like all other boys he was educated in the rhetorical studies of the day. He loved the birds, especially the nightingales so numerous in the woods about Tagaste. Like all other children, too, he lied to his tutor and his schoolmasters, stole from his parents' table and from the kitchen and the cellar so that by making presents to them he might rule over his companions. From Tagaste he went to Madaura, an old Numidian city about thirty miles from Tagaste, where he continued his education, made his first acquaintance with Virgil, absorbed the licentiousness of Plautus and Terence and became a simple pagan. He was then in his sixteenth year.

Since the grammarians of Madaura could teach him nothing more, he returned to his native town, spent a year there and then departed to Carthage to place himself under the tutelage of well-known rhetoricians. At Carthage were to be found in abundance all the vices of a great provincial city —Carthage, "the cesspool" as Augustine will later on describe it. While in Carthage, he writes, "I dared to roam the woods and pursue my vagrant loves beneath the

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shade.” Again, “From the quagmire of concupiscence, from the well of puberty, exhaled a mist which clouded and befogged my heart, so that I could not distinguish between the clear shining of affection and the darkness of lust. . . . I could not keep within the kingdom of light, where friendship binds soul to soul. . . . And so I polluted the brook of friendship with the sewage of lust.” “Evil stormed confusedly within me, whirling my thoughtless youth over the precipices of desire. And I wandered still further from Thee, and Thou didst leave me to myself; the torrent of my fornications tossed and swelled and boiled and ran over.” And during this time, “Thou saidst nothing, O my God!” While at Carthage, to love and to be loved seemed to him the single object of life. He was not actually in love, but he loved the idea of love. “Nondum amabam, et amare amabam . . . amare amans.” A brilliant student, he led in every thing and absorbed all that his masters had to teach: rhetoric, dialectic, geometry, music, mathematics. He thought of studying law and by reason of his gift of words to become an advocate, the surest way to wealth and fame.

In the midst of his gay sensualities, by some providential chance, he read Cicero’s Hortensius in which was contained an eloquent praise of wisdom. To Augustine, now about nineteen years old, Cicero’s dialogue became a revelation and opened before him a splendid vision. He has preserved for us some of the phrases which moved him so profoundly. “If,” says Cicero, “as pretend the philosophers of old time, who are also the greatest and most illustrious, we have a soul immortal and divine, it behooves us to think, that the more it has persevered in its way, that is to say, in reason, love and the pursuit of truth, and the less it has been intermingled and stained in human error and passion, the easier will it be for it to raise itself and soar again to the skies.” Here for the first time Augustine received the call to devote his life to the study of wisdom, here was implanted within his soul the seed which in his later life was to blossom into the contemplation of God and the all-absorbing love of Christ.

Now occurred one of those sudden Augustinian changes. When fortune seemed to be smiling upon him in Carthage he suddenly left the city and returned to his native town to set himself up as a teacher of grammar. He opened, as he himself says, a word-shop. At this period the only thing he cared about and sought after was pleasure; he was, in fact, an epicurean.

Apparently Augustine was not satisfied with remaining in his obscure native town for we find him before long back again in Carthage, where he was to spend nine years, years occupied and perhaps, one may say, squandered in disputes sterile or unfortunate for himself and for others—briefly, in an utter forgetfulness of his true
vocation. It was at this time and in Carthage that his son was born whom they called Adeodatus.

For some reason not altogether clear Augustine became dissatisfied with Carthage and since literary reputations were made in Rome he betook himself to the Golden City, drawn there, possibly, by the reputation and sought-for patronage of Hierius, orator to the City of Rome. Like all great cosmopolitan centers at that time, Rome was unhealthy and Augustine fell sick. He had such a bad attack of fever that he nearly died. He was frightened at the idea of having seen death so near, at a moment when he was so far from God—so far, in fact that it did not occur to him to ask for baptism, as he had done, in a like case, when he was little. He shudders when he recalls the danger that beset him. "Had my mother's heart been smitten with that wound, it never could have been healed. For I cannot express her tender love towards me, or with how far greater anguish she travailed of me now in the spirit, than when she bore me in the flesh." But Monica prayed and Augustine was saved.

Rome, it seems, gave him a none too friendly reception and he soon tired of it. In Augustine's writings it is impossible to find a word of praise for the beauty of the Eternal City, while, on the contrary, one can sense that even when he is inveighing against the worldliness and corruption of Carthage, he still loves the proud Carthaginian city. Augustine was always a true African, never a Roman.

His unsatisfactory Roman experience was ended by his appointment to the professorship of rhetoric at Milan. At the expense of the city of Milan and in the imperial carriages, he travelled through Italy to take up his new post.

Much as I should like to do so, I cannot linger to recount Augustine's life in Milan, how he fell under the influence of the great Bishop Ambrose, how he became in very truth a Christian, how he returned to Africa to become the illustrious Bishop of Hippo where in 430 he died while the Visigoths were besieging his episcopal city.

Such in brief was the man who stood between two worlds, the dying world of paganism and the nascent world of Christianity which, by his teachings, his writings and the example of his life he did so much to fashion, so much indeed that after fifteen centuries recent philosophers can still write about "St. Augustine and the Modern World," and "The Future of Augustinian Metaphysics." He influenced Aquinas, he influenced Dante, even as he will influence us if we will but read him.

Augustine was the prophet of personality and the first descriptive psychologist. He holds up to us a mirror of ourselves, for however much he owes to the spirit of his own time, he is in the essentials of his mind a modern man; he is an empiricist describing for
us the phenomena of the inner life. It is interesting, as Mr. Edwyn Bevan says, to recall how little we know of the inner lives of the great masters of Graeco-Roman literature and philosophy. The classical writers had persisted in the belief that men were interested to hear only about the loud actions of court and assembly and battlefield, or the pure industry of the intellect or of passion only in its more obvious animal forms. Personality was never distinctly conceived by them. And when for the first time Augustine unfolded before them a history of things not seen with the eyes, of soundless battles waged within the soul, of a kingdom not of this world, his book of Confessions took the world literally by storm, for he himself says of it, “Quid autem meorum opusculorum frequentius et delectabilius innotescere potuit quam libri confessionum meorum!” The great masters of antiquity had bequeathed splendid memorials of what they thought; they had transmitted little to show what, in their inner lives, they were. But with Augustine as with St. Paul before him, the New Life found expression. Just as the Latin of Cicero was to some extent his own creation for the embodiment of Greek philosophy, so was the Latin of Augustine his creation for the expression of the thoughts and feelings and aspirations of the Christian life. Into the classical Graeco-Roman literary tradition had flowed the Hebraic tradition which had come in with the Latin Bible. The language which Augustine found in his Latin Psalter, gave a vehicle of expression to the emotions of the Christian which was not to be found in any language of the approved academic pattern.

“The abysmal depths of personality”—it was Augustine who first gave men an inkling of what that meant. The very phrase, so commonly heard in modern psychology, is his—“abyssus humanae conscientiae.” Again, how modern he is when he exclaims, “Est aliquid hominis quod nec ipse scit spiritus hominis, qui in ipso est”—“A man comprises something which not even the spirit of the man which is in him, knows.” I think it is true to say that the analysis of mood and motive which makes up a substantial part of the Confessions, is still fresh and illuminating to-day after all that has been achieved by our modern psychological novelists in the way of subtle observation. Whether you observe it first in the letters of St. Paul or in the writings of St. Augustine who was so profoundly influenced by St. Paul, it is clear that it was the experiences of the New Life which really reached the depths of personality and gave a novel interest to that which went on in the mysterious region of emotion and will.

Man lives first and thinks afterwards. Not only as an infant does he breathe and take nourishment and grow, long before the dawn of conscious reason; but his reason, even when developed, can act only
upon what he experiences, that is, upon something which has already been lived through. He makes history by his actions before he can reflect upon it and write it. He takes notice of the facts of nature before he can compare and criticize and shape them into science; while history and science in their turn supply material for further thinking and are examined and sifted and generalized and gathered up into philosophy.

Now in nothing, perhaps, is this development from life to thought, from fact to explanation, better exhibited than in the process by which man has come to recognize what we call his personality, all that is potentially or actually contained within himself—in a word, what it means to be a man. Uneducated races, as we know, tend to personify or animate, external nature; and though this, of course, implies some consciousness of their own personality, it is obviously an incomplete and unreflective consciousness; for it has not yet reached that essential stage in definition which consists in separating a thing from what it is not. This distinction of the personal from the impersonal region, or in other words, of persons from things would appear to have been a gradual process. And even when we reach the climax of ancient civilization, in Greece and Rome, there is no adequate sense, either in theory or practice, of human personality as such. Let me illustrate this by asking you to look at two of the most obvious characteristics of human personality.

Personality, as we moderns understand it, is universal in its scope, that is, it pertains to every human being as such, making him a man. Secondly, by personality we understand the unifying principle which comprises all of man’s attributes and functions, constituting him an individual self. The ancient world never fully understood either of these things. Aristotle looks upon some men as born to be savages; others he believes destined by nature to be slaves whom he regards as nothing but machines; women he regards as nature’s failures in her attempts to produce men. Plato taught on the whole much to the same effect. In his psychology Aristotle leaves an unsolved dualism between the soul and its organism, while in his ethics he has no clear conception of the will and hardly any of the conscience. Here he is but reflecting the condition of contemporary society which was characterized by a fatal divorce between the various departments of life, excellence in one sphere being allowed to compensate for license or even failure in another. It is true to say that neither the universality nor the unity of human personality were adequately understood in pagan times, although Stoicism was beginning to pave the way for their recognition.

To Christianity we owe a new epoch in the development and recognition of human personality. Christ it was who inspired his fol-
lowers to reflect upon who He was and what He meant. Moreover, the early Christians began by experiencing a new life within them, due, as they believed to their being in spiritual contact with the living person of their Lord, and enabling them to say, "I live, yet not I, Christ liveth within me." Then, as time went on they began to give a reason for the hope that was in them. As they grew to fuller consciousness of themselves and as Christianity assumed a place of prominence in the great intellectual centers of the world—Antioch, Athens, Ephesus, Alexandria and Rome—the intellectual presuppositions of the Christian life unfolded themselves and Christian theology was by slow degrees developed.

It is well for us Catholic physicians to remember that the first chapter in the study of human personality was written by the Fathers of the Church and the several general Councils whose purpose, as viewed by themselves, was to define and guard, and to define only to guard, what they conceived to be the essence of Christianity, the divinity and humanity of Jesus Christ. By a new life, in Christ, man's personality was becoming deeper and more intense. It was declared that man was made in the image and likeness of God, and though it was not until a later time that the results of this analysis were transferred from theology to psychology, none the less the real foundations of our subsequent thought upon this point were undoubtedly laid in the first Christian centuries and mainly by Christian men. Knowing these things, is it not somewhat irritating to be told that the study of the psychology of human personality was unknown until, let us say, the last fifty years? I, for one, should like to defend the thesis that Augustine knew more about the psychology of personality than many a popular writer of our own day, just as I should like to defend the thesis that the modern conception of law and order in the universe is directly traceable to the scholastic philosophy of the Middle Ages.

Since my purpose is merely to stimulate your interest in St. Augustine and to invite you to read or to re-read his works, let me conclude these somewhat desultory remarks by quoting a few extracts from his writings.

Augustine had his predecessors, especially Origen and Tertullian, in their different ways, but in introspective power he far surpasses them, as for example, when he sounds the abyss of his own being:

"I come to the spacious fields and palaces of memory, wherein are treasured unnumbered images of things of sense and all our thoughts about them... there in that vast court of memory are present to me heaven, earth, sea and all that I can think upon, all that I have forgotten, therein. There too I meet myself and whatever I have felt and done, my experiences, my beliefs, my hopes and plans for the years to come... Great is the power of memory, exceeding great, O God. Who has ever fathomed its abyss? And yet this power is mine, a part of my very nature, nor can I com-
prehend all that I myself really am . . .

Great is this power of memory, a wondrous thing, O my God, in all its depth and manifold immensity, and this thing is my mind, and this mind is myself. Fear and amazement overcome me when I think of it. And yet men go abroad to gaze upon the mountains and the waves, the broad rivers, the wide ocean, the courses of the stars, and pass themselves, the crowning wonder by.” “Go not abroad, retire into thyself, for truth dwells in the inner man.” “The mind knows best what is nearest to it, and nothing is nearer to the mind than itself.” “We exist, and know that we exist, and love the existence and the knowledge; and on these three points no specious falsehood can deceive us—for without any misleading fancies or falacies of the imagination, I am absolutely certain that I exist, and that I know and desire my own existence.” “In knowing itself, the mind knows its own substantial existence and in its certainty of itself, it is certain of its own substantiality.” “Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” “Free from what?” asks Augustine in the homilies on the Gospel of St. John, and he supplies the answer, “from sin,” that is, from the doing of what is wrong, from the realization of that which is not-value. “More readily does the body obey the slightest dictates of the will and of the soul, and move its limbs at its beck, than does the soul hearken unto itself and accomplish its will merely in the act of willing. Whence and wherefore this inexplicable fact? The mind commands the body, and it obeys forthwith; the mind commands itself and is resisted. The mind commands the hand to be moved, and the movement is accomplished with such readiness, that one can scarce determine where the command ends, and where the execution thereof begins. Yet is the mind mind and the hand is body. The mind commands the mind to will, and yet, though it be itself and none other, it obeyeth not. Whence and wherefore this inexplicable fact? Again I say, it commands itself to will, and would not so command, unless it willed; yet is that not done which is commanded. But it willeth not entirely; therefore it commandeth not entirely. For would it but will in entirety, then would it not need first to utter its command; its will would be accomplished, because it was already accomplished. In part to will, and in part not to will, is not an inexplicable fact; rather is it a sickness of the spirit, that raiseth not itself to its full stature, sustained by the truth but weighed down by custom. And thus are there two wills, and neither is entire; the one possesseth that which the other lacketh . . . I neither willed entirely, nor yet was I entirely unwilling. Therefore was I at war with myself, and divided against myself. And this division took place against my will; but that bears not witness that I house an alien spirit within myself . . . One and the same soul it is, that with half itself willeth this and with its other half willeth that.”

You will observe that St. Augustine is from his own experience reiterating the saying of St. Paul, “The good which I will I do not; but the evil which I will not, that I do.” Is it not perfectly clear that these two great Christian saints were aware of what in our present-day language we call conflict? And if we remember that Augustine uses the term “will” in a wide sense, making it synonymous with inclination, striving and the like, is it not also clear that he has got hold, implicitly if not explicitly, of the concept of the unconscious?

And listen to this example of subtle psychological analysis:

“The same memory contains also the affections of my mind, not in the same manner that my mind itself contains
them, when it feels them; but far otherwise according to a power of its own. For without rejoicing I remember myself to have joyed; and without sorrow do I recollect my past sorrow. And that I once feared, I review without fear; and without desire call to mind a past desire. Sometimes, on the contrary, with joy do I remember my fore-past sorrow, and with sorrow, joy. Which is not wonderful as to the body; for mind is one thing, body another. If I therefore with joy remember some past pain of body, it is not so wonderful. But now seeing that this very memory itself is mind (for which we give a thing in charge, to be kept in memory), we say, 'See that you keep it in mind'; and when we forget, we say, 'It did not come to my mind,' or 'It slipped out of my mind' (calling the memory itself the mind); this being so, how is it, that when with joy I remember my past sorrow, the mind hath joy, the memory hath sorrow; the mind upon the joyfulness which is in it, is joyful, yet the memory upon the sadness which is in it, is not sad. Does the memory perchance not belong to the mind? Who will say so? The memory then is, as it were, the belly of the mind, and joy and sadness, like bitter and sweet food; which, when committed to the memory, are, as it were, passed into the belly, where they may be stowed, but cannot taste. Ridiculous it is to imagine these to be alike; and yet are they not utterly unlike."

And so I might go on quoting from St. Augustine many things which in different contexts and phraseology are part of our contemporary psychological doctrines. What I am trying to do is to arouse your interest in one of our great Catholic ancestors, the first man in Western Europe to look within himself and to describe what he found there; in a word, the first Catholic psychologist.

Catholic Internes Are Needed

In the United States, there are 188 Catholic hospitals approved for internships by the American Medical Association. In these hospitals, there are annually 1,035 positions for internes. There is, however, a scarcity of young physicians, there being only nine graduates to ten approved places. The medical colleges in 1937 graduated 5,377 students. The total number of internships in the 712 hospitals so approved is 7,167, of which number, 5,896 are available annually. To meet this difficulty, the hospitals which have one-year service, can manage, by increasing the duration of service to eighteen months or two years, thus requiring fewer interns each year.

The number of our young Catholic physicians graduating each year is probably less than 850. This number is inadequate. More of our young men should enter the profession of medicine. They are urgently needed for their moral influence in word and example in these days of perverted teachings. The Federation advocates particularly that graduates of Catholic colleges should enter the profession. Medical schools readily admit young men of character and ability, men who may be depended upon to keep Medicine a noble profession and not a mercenary business.