

David Vincent Meconi, S.J. *The One Christ: St. Augustine's Theology of Deification*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013. ISBN 9780813221274. Pp. xxii + 280. \$64.95 (cloth).

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David Meconi teaches patristic theology at St. Louis University. The book under review here is his first published monograph (he has edited or co-edited a number of other volumes), and is derived from a doctoral thesis completed at Oxford under the direction of Oliver O'Donovan. Meconi's central purpose is to elucidate the place of deification in Augustine's theology, and he does this both narrowly, by examining Augustine's uses of the verb *deificare*, and broadly, by treating Augustine's understanding of the creature's union with God. The book is a fine piece of work: modest, careful, accurate, thoughtful, and theologically interesting. It's also the first book-length treatment of its subject, in English certainly, and perhaps in any language.

Meconi's study appears motivated in part by a desire to rebut readings of Augustine that contrast his thought too severely with the emphasis on deification typical of large tracts of the Orthodox tradition. Claims that Augustine has no interest in deification, or that his theology permits no place for the idea, or that he is a theologian of justification rather than deification (there are many other variants) have often been made by both Catholic and Orthodox exegetes and interpreters of Augustine, though more often and more excitedly by the Orthodox. Meconi wants to show, and succeeds in showing, that in their crude forms these judgments, and especially the more sweeping among them (I have in mind as representative example Pavel Florensky's occasional anti-Augustinianism), are not adequate as interpretations of Augustine's texts. He does indeed have a place for the idea of deification, he does indeed use the word (eighteen times in the entire corpus), and he does indeed have a deep conceptual, pastoral, and homiletic interest, from the beginning to the end of his career, in the idea that all creatures, in their different ways, have profound intimacy with the Lord as proper end and real possibility.

Meconi begins (chapters one and two) by treating Augustine's theology of creation, both of creatures in general and of human creatures in particular. For this, he draws mostly from the *Literal Commentary on Genesis* (*De Genesi ad litteram*), and emphasizes Augustine's depiction of the deiformity of the entire created order, together with the intensified instance of this in Augustine's *imago*-theology of the human creature. In a nice summary phrase, Meconi writes that, "Created *ad imaginem Dei*, human persons are simultaneously God's receptive icons as well as God's distinct others" (p. 35). This formulation contains one of the book's leitmotifs: that union with God – deification – is given as possibility by the very fact of being a human creature; and yet that such union never abolishes the difference between God and human creatures. The key category for explaining this, in Meconi's presentation of Augustine, is participation: the unity with God indicated by the term deification is in fact a kind of participation in which "the participant never becomes identical with or absorbed into the one in whom it participates" (p. 51). Participation yields the degree of similarity to God proper to a particular

creaturely kind; but it never, not even in the case of the human creature, yields identity. Meconi's exegetical treatment of the range and intensity of Augustine's tropes for intimacy between God and human creatures (*cohaerere*, *adhaerere*, *affixus*, and so on) is especially good.

Following the treatment of creation, Meconi analyzes, in his third and fourth chapters, Augustine's depiction of what the Son, the incarnate one, and the Spirit, the inspiring one, do to restore creaturely intimacy with God, damaged as it has been by the fall. It's in this context that Augustine uses the language of deification: the verb *deificare*, Meconi shows, is used only in connection with the incarnate one. He becomes human in order that we might become divine – deified – and so it is necessarily the incarnation that provides the possibility of deification for us. The restoration of the *imago* by way of the incarnation is the locus, for Augustine, of talk about deification. Even in that place, however, as Meconi admits, sometimes with reluctance, deification is only one trope among many, and neither the most frequent nor the most significant. However, in some cases, its use is indeed striking. Meconi quotes and discusses Sermon 238, for example, in which Augustine, tells his listeners that they ought to be certain that the Lord will give them his *divina*, his divine reality, so that they, who were human, will become gods (*ut qui homines erant dii fiant*).

Lastly, in the fifth chapter, Meconi treats the ecclesial reception of the divine life. The Church, he argues, is for Augustine the *totus Christus*, Christ's mystical body here below, together with the risen and ascended Christ, understood as "one single organism animated and amalgamated by grace" ( p. 233). *Totus Christus*, the whole Christ, serves therefore as an organizing trope for the idea that creation in its entirety, human, angelic, and the rest, will become 'deified' – where that means transformed into profound and perfect intimacy with the Lord. Meconi provides in this chapter an elegant and accurate exposition of Augustine's sacramental theology, showing that Augustine's thought is the beating heart of his thought about the Church.

Meconi's book, as I've said, is accurate in its rendering of Augustine on the topics he treats, careful in its exegesis of particular texts, and a good corrective to those depictions of Augustine and Augustinianism that over-emphasize pessimism about the human condition, and thus make it difficult to see how the life of the Church – and above all the sacramental life – are grace-filled instruments for bringing about intimacy with the Lord. That is all very good, and the book is sufficiently clear, and sufficiently broad in its scope, especially with respect to ecclesiology and sacramental theology, that it can profitably be read as an introduction to Augustine on those topics even by those without special interests in the deification question.

By the time I'd finished the book, though, I found myself uneasy. It's not that there's anything wrong with what Meconi argues, or anything inaccurate in its particulars. It's rather that there's a subtle distortion in the big picture. Meconi is eager, perhaps over-eager, to emphasize the idea of deification. But he isn't as eager as he should be to undercut that idea, immediately to take back with the left hand what the trope offers with the right. Augustine's thought is replete with conceptual devices intended to emphasize

the difference between the Lord and his creatures: such emphasis is one of his central concerns. Creatures are to be loved under the sign of use, for instance, while the Lord is to be loved under the sign of enjoyment; the Lord is the one whose beauty and love are what he is, while our beauty and love, such as they are, participate in and derive from his; and so on. Juxtaposing these fundamental and essential points with the language of deification – which is available and required because it's scriptural (Genesis 3:5, 3:22; Psalm 82:6; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18; and so on), a point that Meconi doesn't emphasize enough – transforms that language. It shows that deification doesn't mean being made God in the same way that liquefaction means being made liquid. It means, rather, being made as intimate with the Lord as is possible for a creature of a particular kind. Meconi knows this, of course, and says it sometimes. Nevertheless, the reader – this reader, anyway – found himself shifting uneasily in his chair at about every tenth page, and muttering to himself, "yes, but ... " The point, I suppose, is that so far as I can see – and, I think, so far as Augustine could see – deification is and ought to be a minor trope in the fabric of Christian thought and talk. It ought always to be treated as such, handled as though it were a hot coal. Meconi treats it jauntily, sometimes, as if his hands were fireproof.