The doctrine of participation in Augustine's *totus Christus* ecclesiology

Alex Fogleman

Baylor University, Waco, TX, USA
alex_fogleman@baylor.edu

Abstract

Augustine's understanding of the church as part of the *totus Christus* – the 'whole Christ' – has become an important resource in contemporary theology, offering a robust vision of the church's union with God. Yet a key critique maintains that it threatens to elide the distinction between the perfected Christ and the created church. This article addresses this issue by asking how the *totus Christus* doctrine relates to the doctrine of participation. For Augustine, participation is a metaphysical category that expresses the creature's dependent, non-divine status, its essential being out of nothing. The *totus Christus* doctrine is most explicitly an exegetical, not metaphysical doctrine. Nevertheless, by putting these two facets of Augustine's thought together, we can see the way in which they mutually reinforce the view that the astonishing claims of unity in the *totus Christus* are structured by a larger theological grammar that distinguishes God and creature.

Augustine's vision of the church as belonging to the *totus Christus* – the 'whole Christ' – offers some of the most astounding language in the history of Christian thought for naming the church's union with God. 'Let us rejoice and give thanks', Augustine exhorts, 'that we have become not only Christians but Christ himself! … The fullness of Christ, therefore, is both head and members.'[1] In modern theology, this doctrine has proved a valuable resource on several fronts. It is a cornerstone of communion ecclesiology,[2] a prophylactic against individualism[3] and a rich guide for naming Christ's

---

[1] *In Ioannis evangelium tractatus* (hereafter *Io. eu. tr.*) 21.8 (WSA III/12:379, alt). Citations of Augustine's works will primarily refer to the English translation in the series Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century (WSA). Latin citations, though not quoted in the text, have been drawn from Brepols' Library of Latin Texts.

[2] J.-M.-R. Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ: At the Source of the Ecclesiology of Communion* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001).

[3] Robert Jenson, *The Works of God*, vol. 2 of *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1999); John Milbank, 'Ecclesiology: The Last of the Last', in *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 105–37.

identification with the sufferings of his people.[4] It is little wonder that Augustine's understanding of the church as belonging to the whole Christ has found such a wide and largely favourable reception.

Not everyone, of course, has rushed to applaud. A certain line of Reformed criticism, espoused most articulately by the late John Webster, takes the *totus Christus* doctrine to risk confusing Christ's divine perfections with the church's derivative status, thereby elevating the church above its creaturely status.[5] As Webster puts it: 'The notion of the *totus Christus* – of Christ's completeness as inclusive of the church as his body – will be impermissible if it elides the distinction between Christ and the objects of his mercy.'[6] If the *totus Christus* is taken to mean that Christ's divine perfections are inclusive of creatures, Webster argues, one would be compelled to say that Christ is incomplete apart from the addition of something else, and this, in turn, engenders a truncated view of the person and work of Christ. 'The ontological rule in ecclesiology is … that whatever conjunction there may be between God and his saints, it is comprehended within an ever-greater dissimilarity.'[7]

To be sure, Augustine himself has some answers to these questions. In *Sermon* 341, a quintessential expression of the *totus Christus*, Augustine addresses the issue of whether Christ is 'complete' apart from the church. It is not the case that Christ isn't 'complete' (*integer*) apart from the body, Augustine argues, 'but that he deigned to be complete (*integer esse dignatus est*) with us too'. Christ remains complete, not only as the eternal Word 'but also in the very man whom he took on, and with whom he is both God and man together'.[8] Nevertheless, this critique raises important questions not only about ecclesiology but also about the nature of retrieval theology. How is Augustine's *totus Christus* doctrine retrieved, and how do such retrievals compare with the way the doctrine functioned in Augustine's own setting? These questions have been taken up in a recent article by David Moser, which responds to a range of Reformed critiques of the *totus Christus* doctrine to prove its value in contemporary Reformed theology.[9] I wish to add to this discussion an element that is often presumed but rarely given sustained

---

[4]Kimberly Baker, 'Augustine's Doctrine of the *Totus Christus*: Reflecting on the Church as Sacrament of Unity', *Horizons* 37/1 (2010), pp. 7–24; James Lee, *Augustine and the Mystery of the Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017), pp. 52–5.

[5]Webster's views on the church appear in a long essay, 'On Evangelical Ecclesiology', in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), pp. 153–93. This article originally appeared in 2005. He primarily has in mind Catholic, radical orthodox and postliberal theologians (e.g. Ratzinger, Milbank and Jenson, respectively), all of whom, directly or indirectly, draw on De Lubac's reflections on the church and metaphysics of participation. In addition to the specifically theological issues at stake, the implications for ecumenical and political theology are also manifest. How, for instance, can contemporary depictions of the *totus Christus* account for the sins of the historical church? An understanding of the church as constitutive of Christ's being rather than as the object of Christ's mercy could appear to insinuate creaturely imperfections into divine being. For a similar critique of Augustine's ecclesiology, see Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999).

[6]Webster, 'On Evangelical Ecclesiology', p. 174.

[7]Ibid., p. 171.

[8]*Sermones* 341.11 (WSA III/10:26, alt).

[9]This is a different approach than the one taken in a recent article by David Moser, who considers Augustine as only one of three sources – along with von Balthasar and Barth – for elucidating the theological grammar of the *totus Christus* as a response to Protestant objections. See David J. Moser, '*Totus Christus*: A Proposal for Protestant Christology and Ecclesiology', *Pro Ecclesia* 29/1 (2020), pp. 3–30; and responses in the same volume from Michael Allen and Kevin Vanhoozer.

attention – namely, the way in which the *totus Christus* doctrine relates to the doctrine of participation.[10] My contention is that contemporary retrievals that deploy the doctrine of the *totus Christus* to name an ontological unity between Christ and the church in participatory terms often obscure the more complex theological grammar in which Augustine articulated his views. On the one hand, modern theology often forgets that participation, for Augustine, functions to name the creature's ontological *difference* from God – its created status, its dependence on something external to itself – as much as it names the creature's unity with God. For another, Augustine's main categories for describing the *totus Christus* are not ontological but exegetical ones. The *totus Christus* doctrine is as much an exegetical product as a result of philosophical reasoning about of the church's metaphysical status. This is not to say, importantly, that exegetical-grammatical categories are incommensurate with metaphysics. Quite the opposite. Attention to the larger theological grammar in which Augustine understands the *totus Christus* has important ramifications for how we understand the meaning of the doctrine, and how it might be retrieved in contemporary theology. In the end, the doctrine of participation sustains an intensive account of unity between Christ and the church. But it does so by locating the doctrine within a more comprehensive metaphysical vision that upholds the ever-greater dissimilarity between God and creation.

In what follows, I first rehearse some of the main exegetical and grammatical tactics Augustine deploys to name the church's relation to Christ. Next, I outline four ways that participation functions in Augustine's thought, each of which shows how it serves to distinguish God and creation. The conclusion brings these two strands together and proposes a potential pathway for retrieving Augustine's doctrine of the *totus Christus* today.

Grammatical-exegetical arguments for the church's union with Christ

The main categories that Augustine uses to describe the church's relation to Christ in the *totus Christus* are what we might call exegetical and grammatical.[11] By exegetical, I mean that the *totus Christus* is primarily a doctrine that emerges from the need to articulate Christian scripture in a coherent and edifying way for his congregation. By grammatical, I mean tactics that involve the use of categories drawn from grammar and rhetoric in ancient educational contexts. While these may be distinguished from metaphysical categories, in the end they remain tethered to and commensurate with metaphysical conceptions of the church's relation to Christ.

---

[10]Adam Ployd has noted that the role of participation in Augustine's ecclesiology is one of the most pressing desiderata for future research in his *Augustine, the Trinity, and the Church: A Reading of the Anti-Donatist Sermons* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), p. 195. More broadly, the doctrine of participation has received considerable attention across a range of theological engagements. For a few recent examples, see Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010); Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011); Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012); David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013); Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: CUP, 2019); Oliver Crisp, *Participation and Atonement: An Analytic and Constructive Account* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022).

[11]For the use of grammar as a category for understanding the church's relation to Christ, see Ployd, *Augustine, the Trinity, and the Church*, pp. 58–73.

One example we might consider here develops out of trinitarian theology. For instance, in *On the Trinity* 6, where Augustine treats John 17:21 ('that they may be one as we are one'), Augustine claims that wherever scripture uses the word 'one' as a modifying rather than substantive adjective, it implies a unity of will rather than being.[12] The use of 'one' as a substantive adjective, by contrast, entails a unity of substance. When, for example, John 10:30 has Christ say, 'I and the Father are one' (a substantive adjective), scripture refers to a unity of essence. But when, by contrast, we read in 1 Corinthians 6:16–17 that 'whoever cleaves to a harlot is one *body*' or 'whoever cleaves to the Lord is one *spirit*' (both modifying adjectives), we should understand scripture as rendering a unity of wills, not natures. One does not become 'one body' with the harlot or 'one spirit' with God as a union of natures. These are but expressions of two wills coming into alignment.

The most significant use of exegetical-grammatical approaches is Augustine's use of prosopological exegesis – a key feature of the *Expositions of the Psalms*.[13] In ancient rhetoric, the grammarian's first task in reading a passage was to identify the person (Greek *prosōpon*) who was speaking in a text, which was no simple task given the material composition and typography of ancient texts. Making theological use of this grammatical rule, Augustine's main concern in *totus Christus* exegetical contexts is to teach readers how to understand passages of the Psalms that appear infelicitous to put directly in the mouth of Christ – such as having Christ confess wrongdoing for sins, admitting fear, deficiency, lack, etc. In his second *enarratio* on Psalm 30, we find Augustine explaining the matter in a characteristic way:

> He [the Psalmist] is going to say certain things in this psalm that we think inappropriate to Christ, to the excellent dignity of our Head. … Some of the things said here may not even seem suitable for him in the form of a servant … and yet it is Christ who is speaking, because in the members of Christ there is Christ.[14]

Augustine will say of these cases that we must understand Christ as speaking in the voice (*vox*) of the church as distinct, but not separate from, the perfected Christ who is ascended in heaven. Reading scripture well involves learning to discern when we are hearing the voice of Jesus the head and when the voice of his body the church.

---

[12]*De Trinitate* (hereafter *Trin.*) 6.2.9 (WSA I/5:211). He also utilises this pattern in *Conlatio cum Maximino arrianorum episcopo* 15 and *Contra Maximinum arrianum* 1.10 (WSA I/18:200–1, 255–6). On this see Carmen Cvetkovic, 'Unum and Unus Spiritus: The Normative Impact of Augustine's Interpretation of 1 Cor. 6:17 on Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St Thierry', in Anders-Christian Jacobsen (ed.), *The Discursive Fight over Religious Texts in Antiquity* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2009), pp. 192–205. The background to this exegetical issue is found also in Latin anti-Monarchian theology. See e.g. Tertullian, *Adversus Praxeam* 12. Mark DelCogliano, 'The Interpretation of John 10:30 in the Third Century: Antimonarchian Polemics and the Rise of Grammatical Reading Techniques', *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6/1 (2012), pp. 117–38.

[13]On prosopological exegesis in the Psalms commentaries, see Marie-Josèphe Rondeau, *Exégèse prosopologique et théologie*, vol. 2 of *Les commentaires patristiques du Psautier (IIIe–Ve siècles)* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Studium Orientalium, 1985); Hubertus Drobner, *Person-Exegese und Christologie bei Augustinus: Zur Herkunft der Formel una persona* (Leiden: Brill, 1986); Drobner, 'Grammatical Exegesis and Christology in St. Augustine', *Studia Patristica* 18/4 (1990), pp. 49–63; Michael Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere: Augustine's Early Figurative Exegesis* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), pp. 166–212.

[14]See e.g. Augustine, *Ennarationes in Psalmos* (hereafter *En. Ps.*) 30(2).4 (WSA III/15:324).

Crucially, though, the voice of the ascended Christ and the voice of Christ's body the church remain 'one voice'.

Augustine's development of the *totus Christus* doctrine in the Psalms also emerges from reflection on several key passages of scripture that relate the unity of Christ and the church in different ways: members of a body (1 Cor 12), a marriage union (Isa 61:10; Eph 5:32) and, most intriguingly, Christ speaking within members of the body (Matt 25:31–46; Acts 9:4). Michael Cameron has called attention to the way that Augustine's use of prosopological exegesis institutes a deep intimacy between Christians and Christ. Considering the way Augustine's exegetical aims are linked to his developing understanding of Christology, Cameron argues that Augustine's exegesis of scripture in sermons to simple believers served as spiritual exercises for transforming their desires, consciousness and moral action.[15] The preacher's purpose, according to Cameron, was 'to actualize the union of flesh between believer and Christ within consciousness, and to provoke responsive love'.[16] Through these engagements with scripture, the believer becomes attached to the flesh of Christ and 'therefore in a sense constantly ascending to his divinity. … The reality of Christ our head ascended to heaven remains a promise of our future, but is approximated by increments in the efforts of this life.'[17] There is an extraordinary union invoked in such transformations.

While Cameron is surely right to express these moments of christological exegesis as ways of transforming Christians into the flesh of Christ, it is also true that the use of prosopological exegesis serves to keep in focus the distinction between Christ the head and his body the church. The following passage from the *Expositions of the Psalms* expresses this well:

> Let us hear them as one single organism, but let us listen to the Head as Head, and the body as body. The persons are not separated, but in dignity they are distinct, for the Head saves and the body is saved. May the Head dispense mercy, and the body bemoan its misery. The role of the Head is to purge away sins, the body's to confess them. Wherever scripture does not indicate when the body is speaking, when the Head, we hear them speak with one single voice. We have to distinguish as we listen, but the voice is one.[18]

By speaking of the union as a harmony of voices and as assuming another's 'person' or speech, Augustine speaks of the union between two distinct entities in a way that avoids raising the issue of whether created being is confused with divine being. In these instances, Augustine avoids blurring the creator Christ and the creature church by naming their mode of union as a union of speech. They are not one in substance but 'one voice'.

There are other forms of grammatical techniques in Augustine's understanding of the relationship between Christ and the church, but these examples suffice to highlight some of the main ways that Augustine described the *totus Christus*. By drawing on grammatical categories, Augustine can express the union of Christ and the church within a biblical framework. It is an exegetical approach that helps resolve difficulties

---

[15]Michael Cameron, '*Totus Christus* and the Psychagogy of Augustine's Sermons', *Augustinian Studies* 36/1 (2005), p. 65.

[16]Ibid., p. 66.

[17]Ibid.

[18]*En. Ps.* 37.6 (WSA III/16:151).

in understanding the unity of scripture and to promote charity within the body of Christ. Grammatical categories also serve both to distinguish as much as join Christ the head with the ecclesial body.

Augustine on participation

If the *totus Christus* is primarily an exegetical approach to naming the unity of Christ and the church, how should we understand it in relation to Augustine's doctrine of participation? In attending to Augustine's reflections on participation, we see that these, too, like the *totus Christus* formula, provide guidelines for articulating the unity between Christ and the church in terms of theological categories that maintain a clear distinction between divine and creaturely being.

While we should be hesitant to describe Augustine as constructing a systematic metaphysical theory, certain key moments allow us to understand how the grammar of participation functioned in his thought.[19] There are at least four main contexts in which he deployed participation language: first, in his use of pro-Nicene categories to describe the relationship between Father and Son and between God and creation; second, in anti-Manichaean contexts to refute their doctrine of dualism and substantial evil; third, in his account of Christian redemption as deification; and fourth, as referring to the heavenly city's sharing in divine immutability. In each, participation expresses the creature's ontological dissimilarity to God as much as it emphasises union.

Participation in pro-Nicene theology

Participation language underwent important transitions in the Nicene controversies of the fourth century.[20] Before Nicaea – as well as afterwards among opponents of the Nicene formula – participation language could be used with a certain degree of fluidity. One could speak unproblematically about Christ or the Spirit 'participating' in God,

---

[19]There are several articles and chapters on Augustine's doctrine of participation, though currently no monograph treatment: Matthias Smalbrugge, 'La notion de la participation chez Augustin: quelques observations sur le rapport christianisme-platonisme', *Augustiniana* 40 (1990), pp. 333–47; David Meconi, 'St. Augustine's Early Theory of Participation', *Augustinian Studies* 27 (1996), pp. 81–98. Most recently, see Younghua Ge, *The Many and the One* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021). One important critique of Augustinian scholarship that prizes the role of participation is Maartin Wisse, *Trinitarian Theology beyond Participation: Augustine's* De Trinitate *and Contemporary Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2011). Wisse argues – against the 'new canon' Augustinian scholarship of Lewis Ayres, Michel Barnes, Rowan Williams and others – that Augustine rejected a Plotinian account of participation as a metaphysical claim about the creature's participation in God and cast participation in moral terms, as a 'perfected state of mind', not 'the default state of a human being through creation' (p. 276). Wisse points to Augustine's view of the beatific vision as an eschatological, not temporal, reality, and one that hinges upon contemplation and 'purity of heart' to emphasise the non-ontological account of creaturely participation. In Augustine's view, according to Wisse, salvation is moral rather than ontological, and 'doing the good takes priority over knowing the truth' (p. 313).

[20]For a brief but helpful treatment of the 'grammar' of participation in the wake of the Nicene controversies, see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy* (Oxford: OUP, 2004), pp. 274–6, 321–3. Here Ayres describes two such 'grammars': a first grammar governing relations of divine persons, which was curtailed after the fourth century, and a second grammar governing relations of God and creation which was retained. Even for the latter, however, there was a pro-Nicene modification, with 'a heightened sensitivity to the ways in which the created order mirrors the divine incomprehensibility and the extent to which it may serve as a training ground for our apprehension of the divine' (p. 322).

which helped combat third-century Monarchian tendencies. By the latter decades of the fourth century, however, to speak of the Son or Spirit participating in God implied an unacceptable hierarchy in the Godhead. Instead, the language of participation became reserved for naming the creature's dependent status in relation to God.[21]

Augustine was heir to these debates, mostly following Latin pro-Nicene sources like Hilary, Victorinus and Ambrose, while also making key developments of his own. In several passages in *On the Trinity* and the *Homilies on John*, Augustine explains the relation between Christ and creatures in terms owing clearly to pro-Nicene traditions. The Son, he will say, has life in himself; the Son does not participate in life as something alien to his own nature. Immortal life is not a quality of the 'solo God', Augustine puts it in *On the Trinity*, but of the three divine persons. Christ, therefore, has immortal life as internal to his being, while creatures only have immortal life only through participation: 'it was by becoming partakers in his ever-lasting life that we in our own measure have been made immortal. But the life everlasting of which we have been made partakers is one thing, and we who shall live forever by participation in eternity is another.'[22] When Augustine comments on John 5:26 in the *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, similarly, he uses participation language to designate Father and Son as equally belonging to the divine nature, which is characterised by 'life itself' – a concept closely aligned with immutability.[23] The soul, by contrast, constituted by change, receives happiness and beatitude only through participation in God.[24]

Augustine will still want to distinguish the Son from the Father through the language of 'giving' and 'receiving', though he avoids linking the latter term with participation. As he puts it in the 22nd homily on the Gospel of John, 'He [the Father] does not live as one who participates, but lives without change, and is himself entirely life. So he gave the Son the possession of life; just as he has, so has he given. Then what is the difference between them? That the former has given, the latter has received.'[25] He identifies the Father's 'giving' the Son life with the Father's 'begetting' of the Son. He then specifies the character of the Father and Son's having life *in se*: it is 'not to be in need of life from anywhere else, but himself to be the fullness of life, from which others who believe might draw life as long as they live. So then, he gave him the possession of life in himself.'[26] Here, Augustine makes a clear distinction between the life in which creatures participate and the creatures who participate in life. While both the Father and the Son have life as something integral to divine essence, not something in which one member or another participates, Augustine can also make distinctions within the Godhead using the language of begottenness and givenness. The Son's begottenness is tantamount to 'being given', neither of which entails the creaturely status implied in participatory relationships.

---

[21]In addition to Ayres, *Nicaea*, pp. 321–3, see Kellen Plaxco, 'Participation and Trinity in Origen and Didymus the Blind', in Anders-Christian Jacobsen (ed.), *Origeniana Undecima: Origen and Origenism in Western Thought* (Leuven: Peeters, 2016), pp. 767–82; Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 142–3.

[22]*Trin.* 1.2.10 (WSA I/5:71).

[23]*Io. eu. tr.* 19.11 (WSA III/12:343).

[24]*Io. eu. tr.* 39.7–8 (WSA III/12:592–3).

[25]*Io. eu. tr.* 22.10 (WSA III/12:400).

[26]*Io. eu. tr.* 22.10 (WSA III/12:400).

Participation in anti-Manichaean polemic

Augustine also deployed the doctrine of participation to refute Manichean thought, especially Manichaean cosmologies that associated matter with evil. In this context, as Emilie Zum Brunn has shown, Augustine placed a strong emphasis on Exodus 3:14 to understand the immutability of the divine nature in contrast with the ontological poverty of non-being.[27] For Augustine, only God has true being, because God is both immutable and eternal. Between God and non-being, creation is held or suspended in being. Its sheer existence is the lowest form of participation, but in its 'tending' towards God it aspires to a more intensive, active form of participation. In *De beata uita*, Augustine contrasts the creature's 'being held' by God (*haberi a Deo*), a characteristic of all creation, and the Christian's aspiration to 'hold God' through participation in wisdom (*habere deum*).[28] Another nice summary, which uses the language of participation in particular, is found in another early treatise, *The Catholic Way of Life and the Manichaean Way of Life*. There he writes:

> There is one good that is good supremely and in itself, not by the participation of any good but by its own nature and essence (*non participatione alicuius boni, sed propria natura et essentia*); and another good which is good by participation, and by having something bestowed (*aliud quod participando bonum est et habendo*). Thus it has its being as good from the supreme good, which, however, is still self-contained, and loses nothing. This second kind of good is called a creature, which is liable to hurt through falling away.[29]

We see here the way Augustine characterises the good as that which is a good in itself – 'self contained' – not gaining being from something external to itself. This kind of view can be found in later writings. In *Confessions* 7, for example, we find similar statements about creaturely participation. Augustine says that when he looked upon created things, he 'saw that neither can they be said wholly to be or absolutely not to be. They are because they came from you.'[30] For Augustine, creation both exists and does not exist to the extent that creatures are viewed in relation to the God who truly exists. Creation could not exist at all if it did not participate in some degree in the God who is true being, existing immutably.

Participation in Augustine's theology of deification

The doctrine of participation was also a key element in Augustine's theology of deification.[31] Here, too, though, it serves primarily to qualify language about the creature's union with God as a mixing of substances. Augustine retains elements of the basic

---

[27]Emilie Zum Brunn, *St Augustine: Being and Nothingness* (New York: Paragon, 1988).

[28]St Augustine, *On the Happy Life*, vol. 2 of *St. Augustine's Cassiciacum Dialogues* 4.34, trans. Michael Foley (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019), p. 49.

[29]*De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus manichaeorum* 2.4.6 (WSA I/19:117).

[30]St Augustine, *Confessions* 7.11.17, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: OUP, 1991), p. 124.

[31]On deification and participation in Augustine, see Gerhard B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959); Patricia Wilson-Kastner, 'Grace and Participation in the Divine Life in the Theology of Augustine of Hippo', *Augustinian Studies* 7 (1976), pp. 135–57; Gerald Bonner, 'Augustine's Conception of Deification', *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS 37 (1986), pp. 369–86; J. Oroz Reta, 'De l'illumination à la déification de l'âme selon saint Augustin', *Studia Patristica* 27 (1993), pp. 364–82; Gerald Bonner, 'Deification, Divinization', in Allan D. Fitzgerald (ed.), *Augustine through the Ages* (Grand Rapids, MI:

Platonic grammar of participation, but he develops these ideas through focusing on Christ's primary 'sharing' in human flesh. As Augustine's understanding of Christ's humanity matured, he developed a more sophisticated understanding of Christ's flesh as serving more than a merely exemplary function. Christ's human flesh becomes the medium through which Christians are joined to Christ's divinity – *per Christum hominem ad Christum Deum.*[32]

The downward and upward dimensions of participation prompt Augustine to speak of deification in a way that preserves the creature's distinction from God. A passage from *Expositions of the Psalms* 49 encapsulates this nicely:

> It is clear that he called men gods being deified by his grace and not born of his substance. For he justifies, who is just of himself and not from another, and he deifies, who is god of himself and not by participation in another. But he who justifies himself deifies, because he makes sons of god by justifying. 'For to them gave he power to become sons of god' (John 1:12). If we have been made sons of god, we have been made gods; but this is by grace of adoption and not of the nature of our begetter.[33]

Humanity cannot participate in the divine nature itself – not simply because of sin but also because human nature is unlike like the divine nature. A similar thread underlies other passages where Augustine deploys deification language. In *City of God* 14.13, Augustine comments that 'created gods are gods not in virtue of their own being but by a participation in the being of the true God'.[34] In *Expositions of the Psalms* 94.6, likewise, Augustine draws on participation language to avoid saying that creatures share in the divine nature: 'God calls them gods in virtue of participation, not nature; they are gods by the grace through which he willed to deify them.'[35] When Augustine speaks of the Christian's deification, the language of participation helps keep clear the fundamental distinction between creator and creature.

Participation in eternity

One final set of texts to consider on Augustine's doctrine of participation are those that speak of the 'heaven of heavens' (*caelum caeli*) and the 'eternal Jerusalem' as created entities that share in God's being in the hereafter in such a way that their mutability is functionally halted.[36] *Confessions* 12 and *Expositions of the Psalms* 121 are the two most important passages. In the former, Augustine describes the 'heaven of heavens'

William B. Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 265–6; David Meconi, *The One Christ: St Augustine's Theology of Deification* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2013).

[32]*Io. eu. tr.* 13.4 (WSA I/12:245). For this development, see Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere.*

[33]*En. Ps.* 49.2 (WSA III/16:381). See also *En. Ps.* 58[1].7 (WSA III/17:153): 'The Teacher of humility became a sharer in our infirmity to enable us to share in his divinity' (*particeps nostrae infirmitatis, donans participationem suae divinitatis*).

[34]Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans* 14.13, trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), p. 610. See also *En. Ps.* 49.2 (WSA III/16:381): 'It is quite obvious that God called human beings "gods" in the sense that they were deified by his grace, not because they were born of his own substance. … He alone deifies who is God of himself, not by participation in any other.'

[35]*En. Ps.* 94.6 (WSA III/18:414).

[36]On these two passages, see especially Gerald Boersma, 'Jerusalem as *Caelum Caeli* in Augustine', *Augustinian Studies* 49/2 (2018), pp. 247–76.

as a 'kind of intellectual creature' that, while not coeternal with God, nevertheless shares in God's eternity in such a way that it ceases to be mutable: 'Without any lapse to which its createdness makes it liable, by cleaving to you it escapes all the revolving vicissitudes of temporal progress.'[37] While the heaven of heavens could, because its nature remains mutable, potentially fall away, it remains functionally immutable as long as it cleaves to God – a cleaving that Augustine describes with the language of participation.

It should be noted that Augustine does not link the 'heaven of heavens' concept from *Confessions* 12 explicitly with the church – a connection that is much easier to grasp in the discussion of the heavenly Jerusalem in the exegesis of the Psalms.[38] In his exposition of Psalm 121:3 ('our feet are standing in your gates, O Jerusalem; Jerusalem, which is being built as a city whose participation is in *Idipsum*'), Augustine interprets Jerusalem as the heavenly city that shares in divine immutability in such a way that it ceases to be mutable: 'The city that participates in the *Idipsum* shares in that stability; … [the Psalmist] cries out, "Our feet were standing in the forecourts of Jerusalem"; for there all things stand and nothing passes away.'[39] Here Augustine's reflections are even more thoroughly christological. While it is too much for human minds to understand sharing in God's being, he argues, they can cleave to Christ's flesh and so be made capable of participating in the divinity of the Word:

> Hold onto what Christ became for you, because Christ himself, even Christ, is rightly understood by this name, I AM WHO AM, inasmuch as he is in the form of God. In that nature wherein 'he deemed it no robbery to be God's equal' (Phil. 2:6), there he is *Idipsum*. But that you might participate in *Idipsum*, he first of all became a participant in what you are; 'the Word was made flesh' (John 1:14) so that flesh might participate in the Word.[40]

The main idea to note here is that, even for this sphere of creation – the highest form of participation, in which creaturely mutability is held in check – participation language is deployed once again as a way of safeguarding divine transcendence. As close as the *caelum caeli* or eternal Jerusalem comes to overcoming the creator–creature gap – even to the point of ceasing mutability – Augustine retains a precise level of clarity in observing the way participation language upholds the more fundamental distinction between God and creation.

The preceding passages are just a small sampling of Augustine's reflections on participation. In each of these four examples, however, participation describes powerful expressions of creaturely union with God. At the same time, however, this language names the more fundamental dissimilarity between God and creatures. Any conjunction between God and human creatures is premised upon – to return to Webster's language – an ever-greater dissimilarity.

---

[37] Augustine, *Confessions* 12.9.9 (p. 250). Cf. 12.11.12 (p. 251), where he will reiterate this notion, claiming that while the heaven of heavens 'never at any point betrays its mutability', it nonetheless 'suffers no variation and experiences no distending in the successiveness of time'.

[38] My thanks to Gerald Boersma for emphasising this point. On the close link between the church in heaven and the church on earth, see Émilien Lamirande, *L'Eglise céleste selon saint Augustin* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1963); Pasquale Borgomeo, *L'Eglise de ces temps dans la predication de saint Augustin* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1972).

[39] *En. Ps.* 121.6 (WSA III/20:19–20).

[40] *En. Ps.* 121.5 (WSA III/20:7, alt.).

Conclusion: Augustine on the church's participation in Christ

How, then, should we understand the relation between Augustine's doctrine of participation and his doctrine of the church as part of the *totus Christus*? While Augustine rarely uses the language of participation to describe the church's relation to Christ as part of the *totus Christus*, what we find in the use of grammatical-exegetical techniques is closely aligned with the way in which the doctrine of participation functions in his thought. It is not the case that grammatical categories of distinguishing Christ and church are non-metaphysical.[41] Rather, grammatical accounts of the *totus Christus* correlate with Augustine's doctrine of participation as ways of safeguarding the distinction between God and creatures in a way that makes possible an account of their close union.

Put differently, Augustine's understanding of participation should not be understood as disturbing the strong emphasis on the church's union with Christ. Rather, it provides a rich theological canvas in which the church's sharing in Christ can be drawn with bright colours. For Augustine, participation language involves naming the creature's ontological subordination to God – its creation out of nothing, its dependence on God. Participation stresses that creatures are not immutable or eternal, but that they gain existence and growth in likeness to God by cleaving to God. Augustine can say rather plainly that Christ is 'whole' even without the ecclesial body; he deigns, however, to be whole by including the church (*Sermones* 341.12). He also uses a variety of grammatical strategies to texture the difference between Christ and the church. The church and Christ speak in one voice. They are one in will, not in nature. This emphasis aligns with the grammar of participation Augustine deploys, conceptualised in pro-Nicene and anti-Manichaean contexts and extended in a theology of deification and the eternal Jerusalem's sharing in divine immutability. Both grammatical conceptions of the *totus Christus* and the doctrine of participation articulate the way in which the church remains in intimate union with Christ without thereby threatening the creator–creature distinction. Even where the eternal city is said to share in God's eternality to such a degree that its fundamental mutability is checked, it retains its creaturely status, since its immutability is a gift received by cleaving to God. Indeed, part of the condition of receiving this gift is maintaining the humble recognition that it does not have these qualities in itself but only through participation.

To return to the criticism of the *totus Christus* with which we began, we are now at a place to recognise how the doctrine may be better understood amid contemporary retrieval theologies. This study presents both challenges and opportunities for retrieving Augustine's doctrine of the *totus Christus.* If proponents draw on Augustine to proclaim the deep communion that occurs between Christ and church, while detractors worry that it obscures the creator–creature distinction, Augustine himself provides important resources for navigating these poles via recourse to the doctrine of participation. The Websterian warning that the *totus Christus* doctrine must guard against blurring creator and creature is answered by Augustine's doctrine of participation, which upholds, not threatens, the creator–creature distinction. The doctrine of participation grounds the ontological alterity of God and God's creatures, while still providing the metaphysical foundation for naming their intimate union. Augustine meets Webster's critique by arguing that the creature's participation in Christ never amounts to a transgression of

---

[41]*Contra* Wisse, *Participation*, pp. 277–8.

the fundamental gap between creator and creature. In this atmosphere, participation affirms the 'ever-greater dissimilarity' between God and creation, even as it lays claim to a bold affirmation of the church's intimate communion with its holy Lord.[42]