Weekly Lenten Reflections by Donald Burt, OSA

Introduction by Arthur Purcaro, OSA, Acting Vice President, Mission and Ministry

As we find ourselves at the beginning of the 2019 Lenten season, I share with you the following reflections prepared in 2003 by our brother Donald Burt (1929–2014) for a four-part series on Augustinian spirituality, sponsored by the Office for Mission Effectiveness, as this office was formerly called. Don lived in the spirit of St. Augustine, especially by generously sharing the fruit of his study and meditation with others through his writings and through the example of a life well lived. His wisdom, sense of humor, calm spirit and general kindness were a gift and blessing to the Province of St. Thomas of Villanova.

Enjoy the journey!

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Week One: Facing the Reality of Life—Both the Good and the Bad of the Journey
Week Two: Discovery of Self—The First Step in the Discovery of God
Week Three: Let Me Know You—Steps in Discovering the Hidden God
Week Four: Destiny—The Possibility of Salvation
Week One: Facing the Reality of Life—Both the Good and Bad of the Journey

What is our present state and how should we deal with it?

Presented by Donald X. Burt, OSA, Wednesday, March 12, 2003

A. MEANING OF SPIRITUALITY

Spirituality is one of those impressive words that is sufficiently vague as to mean anything you want. In its most broad sense it can encompass how one sees the world and deals with it a sensible human fashion. In this usage it begins with knowledge of the self and the real world beyond the self. It then moves to the development of rules of action for making wise and prudent decisions about living in such a world.

The term “Spiritual Exercises” has always been off-putting for me. It brings to my mind those morning meditations I went through which were based on thoughts someone else created, conveniently organized into three or four points. In the early days of my religious life, this exercise was done at 5:30 in the morning, an auspicious time giving sleep to weak and an excuse for the strong to avoid further “spiritual thinking” in the midst of their busy day.

In our present worldly world, a discussion of spirituality can be sleep-inducing in lecture form and conversation-inhibiting in small groups. The sentence “Let me now talk about my spiritual life” invites scoffing by the unkind and tempts normally patient friends to walk quickly away.

It is unfortunate that this is so because a developed spiritual life is a strong support for us as we make our wandering way through the sometimes pandemonium of daily life. Most of us can identify with the trials of that poor mythological fellow, Sisyphus, day after day rolling a huge boulder up a steep mountain, only to have it roll back down to the bottom to be pushed up again. We seem to be doing something similar day in and day out: rising, off to our chores, four hours of labor, lunch, more labor, finish our tasks, dinner, sleep and then begin another day with the same old rock to be rolled up the same boring hill.

On most days, we go through the process in an unthinking way, but then suddenly we may stop in the midst of our routine and ask: “Why?” “Is that all there is?” “Is this blindly mechanical existence the total meaning of my life?” Such questions that seem to drag us beyond the daily pedestrian “grind” of our lives, are the beginning of a movement into the spiritual realm. It is in this realm of “the spirit,” a vision of human life that goes beyond the humdrum of everyday life and material needs, that we begin our efforts to make sense of our ordinary day-by-day existence.
B. THE CHALLENGE TO FACE THE REALITY OF OUR LIVES

One thing seems certain: A sensible spirituality must be based on reality ... The facts of life as they really are not as we sometimes pretend them to be. We must accept the truth about life before we can handle it sensibly. Dealing with life demands that we first know what it is, that we recognize both what we are and what the world is like.

As Augustine remarked: “My knowledge captures the truth of my situation only when my judgments, my insights about the reality of my world correspond with the facts” (On True Religion, 36.66). Certainly, that most perfect form of knowledge, wisdom, cannot rest on an erroneous idea about what the world is truly like, what I am truly like. If I claim to know that I am all-perfect, that indeed I am God, I cannot be called wise. Indeed, I am insane. Like those poor souls who laugh at a world their terrible fever has created, I am not in a happy state, a state which (if we recognized its true character) would cause horror, not ecstasy. The fact of the matter is that (again as Augustine observed):

Such is the overwhelming power of unconquerable truth, that one would rather keep one's wits and cry than lose one's wits and laugh.

Sermon 150, 10; cf. Sermon 175, 2.

It is in this realistic spirit that I offer the following facts about ourselves and the world. They are not exotic truths. Most of us have come to recognize the truth of most of them through our own personal experience. I would suggest that these basic truths about ourselves and the world are (unless I am crazy too) the foundation for a healthy spiritual life.

C. FACTS ABOUT OURSELVES

In response to his prayer “Let me know myself!” Augustine heard deep inside himself the answer:

“You are a beast.”

“You are a beast with dreams.”

“You are a bit cracked.”

These were the first truths that Augustine came to know about himself. They also are truths about you and me and every human being. We too are beasts. We too have our dreams. And we too are a little bit cracked.

a. We are “beasts.”

As I stand here hungering for my lunch, I freely admit: I AM A BEAST! I am an animal. I am not a pure spirit, and (to quote Seinfeld from another context), “there is nothing
wrong with that!” Indeed, Augustine tells me that I am crazy if I try to pretend that my body is not part of being “me” (On the Soul and its Origin, 4.2.13). I must not be ashamed of being an animal. I am an animal because that is how God made me to be. Sometimes I try to ignore the fact but that is because of my pride. Sometimes when I am pretending to be God, I try to deny that like other animals I have physical needs and drives and passions, that like other animals I am gradually falling apart, that like other animals I will someday die.

It is sad that sometimes I feel ashamed of being an animal. I am what I am because God wanted me so to be. My body is part of my being, and in my body, I glorify the God who made me. In taking care of my body I take care of a temple of God. God made me to glorify him and to be happy. And he wanted me to be happy not as some disembodied spirit but as a human being, a being of spirit and flesh and blood. In heaven even Jesus can do no more for me than to make me a glorified (but glorious) animal.

Indeed, Augustine goes so far as to say that we humans cannot be fully happy WITHOUT our bodies. That’s why the Christian heaven is so much better than the heaven of the pagans. Crossing the river Styx to the place of the dead was not a pleasant prospect for the ancients precisely because seats on Charon’s ferry were reserved for “nobodies,” shadowed souls without flesh and blood. Augustine rejoiced in the miracle of Christ’s resurrection because it showed that indeed the human body CAN survive the grave. It gave him the hope that one day he would be able to be in his eternal home with his flesh and blood. He for one knew that he could not be fully at peace until his body rejoined his soul and he thought those who believed otherwise to be quite insane (Sermon 241, 7).

The fullness of heaven will not be in being cut in half but in being well-tied together. In heaven we will not be alienated from our bodies. As Augustine says:

We will be friends with our body. (Sermon 155, 14)

And, as a result:

Whatever our spirits decide will be accepted happily by our bodies and our spirits will be careful not to choose anything which would embarrass their good physical friend. (City of God, 22.30)

God made me and you to be beasts, and beasts we shall be forever and ever. But if and when we get to heaven, we shall be very, very happy beasts. And that’s a fact.

b. We are beasts with dreams.

Luckily, being beastly is not the only fact about ourselves that we must accept. For sure, I am a beast, but I am a beast who dreams. I dream of being something more than I am. Because I am a being of body, I must live in the present, but I also live in the past through memory and in the future through anticipation. I am a beast with spirit, and
sometimes my spirit seems to carry me to the very heavens. I am a SPIRITED being, and to ignore this is just as silly as to ignore my beastliness.

To ignore the needs of my body is to die. To ignore the needs of my spirit is to die in a much more terrible way. It is because of my spirit that I dream of living forever. It is because of the awesome (but terrifying) powers of my spirit that I have the possibility of living forever unhappy. It is because of the wonderful, fantastic powers of my spirit that I can come to recognize the Infinite God and, with the help of his healing grace, to choose to live forever happy.

But eternal happiness or unhappiness is not part of my present. Just now I only dream and hope and love and believe. Indeed, I am a beast with spirit, and woe to me if I forget it. I am a being who hungers, and the hungers of my spirit are eternal and infinite. My happiness depends on their fulfillment.

c. We are dreaming beasts who want to be happy.

The further fact we discover about ourselves when we look deep inside our “self” is that day in and day out we are consumed by a thirst for happiness. As Augustine reminded his listeners one day:

You are seeking happiness. You want to be filled with joy. You want to be so stuffed with good things that you don’t experience any unfulfilled desire or lack anything. (Sermon 72, 10)

I want to be happy, and that’s a fact! But I can’t be happy if I am hungry and my hungers are many. The prophet Jeremiah had me in mind when he cried out one day:

If I enter the city, look at those consumed by hunger! Even the prophet and the priest forage in a land they know not. (Jeremiah, 14.18)

What are these hungers? What indeed do I want? Each of us has his or her own personal list of “wants” but I believe that some of the things I “want” are wanted by every human being.

For example, I want to LIVE! and this means more than simply existing. I want to live and at the very PEAK of my powers. I don't want to merely survive; I want to FLOURISH and indeed flourish forever and ever. I don't merely want to make a living ... to have enough bread for my table. I want orchids on my table too. I want to be able to live and enjoy life at the highest level possible for a human being. And then I want to go beyond that possibility (because humans, you see, must die and I truly do not want to die). I want my life-force to be in me without end. Indeed, I hunger for LIFE ITSELF.

It is because of my hunger for life that I do my best to forget about death, avoid pain, and worry about future security. I want to LIVE! and for this reason, I clutch at things that seem to promise secure and comfortable living in the future. I want to LIVE! and thus I avoid taking risks, rocking the boat, sticking my neck out. I avoid taking responsible positions because taking charge makes me vulnerable to the envy and
hatred of those I must rule. It seems so much safer to be ignored in the anonymity of the crowd. And yet I don't want to be simply an anonymous THING in this world. I want to be more than just a "cog" in someone else's wheel. I want to be a SOMEBODY!

That's my second great desire: I want my life to have some MEANING. After so many years as a little kid having people look down on me, now I am finally grown up. I have had enough of being told to go and play, to go to school, to go to bed, to "eat my peas," to "sit up straight," to "stop scratching," to do all sorts of things of no particular importance. Now I want to be treated with respect. I want my life to be of some consequence. And hence each day I analyze my life for its value and try to do things that will make it seem more important. And yet I am not all that sure what IS important. Certainly, it is more than being feared, being a presence in the lives of others. I was that when I lumbered clumsily about the basketball court as a sincere but inept member of my high school team. I was a presence to others. Some may even retain the scars. But the whole affair had little meaning. It was just a game that children play. Is there nothing more to life than that?

I, along with the young Augustine, hope there is more. I hope that I am not now wasting my life on adult games. In his Confessions, the forty-year-old Augustine sardonically observed that the trifling games of children are called "business" when they grow up. (Confessions, 1.9.15) I hope that is not the story of my life, a movement from game to game. I want to be different. I want to be myself. I want to depend on no one else. I say, "If only I could stand on my own private mountain, a person of special character and independent means, then the world would look up and I would be important."

Of course, it is a fantasy. I cannot exist by myself. To get by, I need a little help from my friends. Oh, it is true that I want to be free (that is another of our basic desires), but the freedom I seek is not the freedom of the solitary. It is the freedom I feel when I am held in the arms of one who loves me. I want to live, and I want my life to have meaning, but more than either of these ... I want to be LOVED.

This is my third great hunger. I hunger for love. I want my life ... no, I want ME to be loved and I want somebody for me to love. I want to be important for someone else. I want someone to be a fool for. I want someone to look at me and truly SEE me and not turn away in horror. I want someone who will be able to say to me: "My friend, I cherish you."

I want someone so close to me that, if I should ever leave, I would rip away part of their life and take it with me. I want someone to be so buried in me that when they leave part of me will go with them. I want someone who would be willing to empty themselves and take me into them. I want someone who would be willing to live in me. I want someone for whom I would willingly die. I want someone who would die for me. I know that if I have such a love, whatever else happens to me, my life will flourish and have meaning. In such an eternal, all-embracing love, I may even last forever. And forever I will never ever be alone.
After 30 years Augustine found such a person, it was Jesus-God ... lover who indeed died for Augustine and lived in Augustine even before Augustine came to recognize him.

And so too is this wonderful fact true for us. It is a fact known only by faith, but it is a fact nonetheless.

d. We are limited beings who are somewhat cracked.

Such a fact is indeed a happy fact and there are other happy facts about ourselves that are well to remember, especially in the midst of the sometimes winter days of our spirit. It is that basically we human beings are GOOD, and we have wonderful powers. Thus, we find Augustine saying:

The great good God has made us human beings the loveliest ornaments on earth. (City of God, 19.13)

And again:

If you praise the works of God, then you will also have to praise yourself, for you too are a work of God. (Commentary on Psalm 144, 1)

And again:

If the creation of any living creature calls for unutterable praise to the Creator from the thoughtful person who devoutly considers it, how much more the creation of a human being above that of any living creature! (Letter 166, 15)

Indeed, God does not make junk. Or, Augustine succinctly observes:

There is no such thing as a useless human being. (Freedom of the Will, 3.23.66)

This being said, there is a somber fact that must be added a fact we learn from experience, if not by the sometimes-unkind remarks of others. It is that we are beings who are limited and cracked. When some came to Augustine proudly proclaiming that they were going to create the perfect society by admitting only those who were perfect, Augustine laughed and said:

How in the world are you going to find such people? Many promise themselves that they will live a holy life, but they forget that they have been placed in the furnace of life and have come out half-cracked. (Commentary on Psalm 99, 11)

Indeed, I (and you too) are “cracked pots,” and we must face up to that reality every day of our lives. I may be destined for heaven, but just now I don’t feel that good. I roll out of bed each morning in parts. I have knees that ache and a stomach that gets upset. Just now I sometimes have unreasonable fears for my future. Just now I sometimes have very justified remorse for my past. I am a professed religious but that does not change things. Augustine once said that, when you baptize a drunk, all you get is a baptized
drunk (Sermon 151, 4-5). So too, when you profess a cracked pot all you get is a professional cracked pot.

God knows (though sometimes I don’t act that way) I am limited. I can’t figure out the answers to everything. I can’t do everything. Such limits are not a sign that there is something wrong with me. My limitations come not from my cracks but from my creatureliness. I am limited because I was created from nothing. My “crackedness” shows itself in my limitations when I pretend that I am not limited, that I know everything, that I am a savior of the world capable of doing anything. The fact that I cannot know or do everything is not a disability; it is just an expression of my being “me,” this “Donald.” Not accepting my limits is a sign that this “Donald” is cracked.

If we were not cracked, if we had remained whole, we would have rejoiced in our limits. We would have been happy with our limited intelligence, knowing that we had infinite time to discover the answers. We would have been like kids giggling as they pieced together a huge jigsaw puzzle because they just KNEW that, ultimately, they would discover how all the pieces fitted together. Without our cracks we would have rejoiced in our limited powers of loving, knowing that our taste for infinite good would be continuously satisfied. Like children clutching giant cups of lemonade, we would have exulted in our limited straws that extended the pleasure of our long cooling drinks.

It follows from the good and bad we find in us that the best we can hope for in this life is that our lives will be a mixture of the good and bad, of the pleasant and the unpleasant, of sorrow and joy. But, whatever the character of our life may be just now, another fact is that it is transitory.

e. Life is passing.

Augustine stated this fact about our lives in terms like the following:

    We are now travelers on a journey. We cannot stay in this place forever. We are on our way, not yet home. Our present state is one of hopeful anticipation, not yet unending enjoyment. We must run without laziness or respite so that we may at last arrive at our destination. (Sermon 103, 1)

Indeed, the reality of our life just now is that it is constantly passing away. Whether we are now feeling the pleasure of a good life or the pain of a bad life, whether we are in the innocence of our infant life or in the regrets of a life lived long but not always well, whether we are at the peak of our mental and physical powers, or at a stage where we are beginning to forget that “long ago” period when we were “flourishing” and not simply existing ... in sum, whatever our condition is at the present moment, we are in the midst of a life that is moving towards death.

We are in the midst of a truly dying life. Whether we are young or old, we are all travelers on the same road, a road that leads ultimately through the door of death to a life without death. We are in the midst of a life that is rushing towards that death-door that is the entrance to eternal life. To ignore this fact is a special form of madness. It is like living in a motel, an Inn for Travelers, as though we would be there forever.
All of the facts mentioned so far, the facts ...

... that we are body;

... that we are spirit;

... that we want to be happy;

... that we are essentially good;

... that we are limited and cracked;

... that we are in transit.

Each of these facts can be known by experience if we but open our minds to see them. But there is a fifth and perhaps most important fact that can be known only by Faith. It is simply this: We live in a world ruled by an infinitely good God who by his provident care works with us so that someday we can be perfectly happy and who, in the meantime, gives us the strength to get through.

D. CONCLUSION: DEALING WITH THE FACTS OF LIFE

The question now becomes: how should we deal with such a transitory life just now? Augustine suggests that it comes down to two things:

1. We must control ourselves.

2. We must endure.

First, we must control our enjoyment of the good things of life. And, if we are not terribly unlucky there will be good times, times which prove the truth of Augustine's statement:

\[ \text{The world is a smiling place, a place filled with beauty and power. (Sermon 158, 7.7)} \]

But also we must be prepared to endure the bad times that will inevitably come upon us, times perhaps filled with sorrow when we are tempted to despair. Augustine put it this way in a sermon to his people:

There are two things enjoined in this life by the Lord, which seem toilsome to us: to hold back and to hold out—restraint and endurance. We are told to restrain ourselves or hold back from things that in this world are called good, and to hold out against or endure the things that abound in this world that are bad. Whether we never had it so good or never had it so bad, we must wait for the Lord, wait for him to give us what is truly good and pleasant and to ward off from us what is truly evil. (Sermon 38, 1.1; cf. City of God, 1.29)
Finally, in good times and bad we must constantly remember that they will not be forever, that we are still like the injured Samaritan in the New Testament story. In good times or bad, we are waiting for the Lord to come and take us to our heavenly home.

Augustine came to believe in the promises of Jesus Christ that, whatever happens to us in this life, we will never be left alone. If we are lucky (and again sadly some are not), we will always have some humans who care for us who are willing to rejoice with us on our good days and support us on our bad. But even when we lose all of these, we still have present with us a loving God ... a God who, though unwilling to overrule the bad human decisions that cause so much of our suffering in life, has through his own death guaranteed that we can have perfect happiness on the other side of death, who has promised that on this side of death and through death he will stay with us supporting us along the way.

This is the reality of our lives. Facing up to it and dealing with it is the beginning of a truly spiritual life.
INTRODUCTION

After years of living a pagan lifestyle and searching for the meaning of life in various ideologies (Manicheanism, Neo-Platonism, Skepticism), Augustine finally came to the Christian point of view. Thereafter, the spiritual life of a human being meant one thing for him: the attempt to arrive at union with that person who was All-Good—the infinite, immutable God. But where in this life is that God to be found? God’s primary place (if that is a proper word) is in that immense realm beyond time, an area far removed from human experience and impossible to reach as long as we continue our pilgrimage on earth. The very fact that we are “pilgrims” is a sign that we have not yet arrived at our destiny. Where then are we to find God in this world?

Augustine’s answer is that we must look within. God is everywhere, but in creation his strongest presence is in each individual human being. The beginning of the search for God must thus begin with a discovery of self. It is for this reason that Augustine prayed:

O unchanging God, let me know myself; let me know you. That is my prayer. (Soliloquies, 2.1.1)

THE MYSTERY OF MY “SELF”

In his Confessions, Augustine wrote:

O Lord, you alone know what I am. Even though Paul said, “No man knows what he is in himself except his own spirit” (1 Corinthians. 2.11), there is much about me that even my spirit does not know. (Confessions, 10.5.7)

He recognized that his prayer to know himself was a prayer not easily answered. Indeed, there is a darkness inside each of us that is difficult to penetrate. Our present is often cloudy, and our future is beyond prediction. As Augustine admitted to his friends:

I may be able to know to some extent what I am today but what I shall be tomorrow I do not know. (Sermon 179, 10)

One thing is certain: Ventures into self-discovery can be frightening. Those who look deeply into their true selves are like hardy spelunkers who plunge deep into the crevasses and caverns of the earth’s crust, sometimes trapped in spaces too narrow for
exploration, sometimes lost in the silent shadowed passages of that world beneath the surface of pleasant ordinary experience. To plunge inside ourselves can be even more terrifying than entering a dark cave. There is no science to guide our way. There is no comforting light beyond that dim lamp of reason which operates none too well even in daylight. As Augustine discovered, the only true illumination that can be found in the cavern of the self is a divine light shining within whose source is as mysterious as the self it tries to reveal.

Once I begin that journey inside myself, I soon learn the truth of Augustine’s descriptions of his own experience. I find an abyss deeper than any sea (Commentary on Psalm 41, 14; Commentary on Psalm 76, 18). I discover that the hidden life throbbing inside the depths of my spirit is a site with many facets and many passages marvelous beyond my wildest dreams (Confessions, 10.17.26).

Beginning this journey into the depths of myself, I quickly come to understand Augustine’s words that it is easier to record the “comings and goings” of the hairs on my head than to keep track of the surging feelings coursing through my heart day after day (Confessions, 4.14.22.). I discover with him that this work of exploring that which is the closest thing to me, my very self, is a chore analogous to the punishment imposed on Adam. Like the fallen Adam, I find that to support my life I must dig into a field difficult to cultivate. In my search for my “self,” my life becomes a task of “too much sweat (Gen. 3:17-19)” (Confessions, 10.16.25).

Despite the difficulty, my search for self must be done. If I cannot live with the truth about myself, I can never hope to discover the truth about God. Unless I am able to find the true “me,” I will have nothing of value to offer to others for them to love. Without some honest discovery of myself, there will be no “me” to be loved. I will be an empty shell of no importance.

THE NEED FOR HONESTY

The first step in discovering my true self is to make a firm decision to be honest. There is no question that, looking at my “inner self,” the realm where my spirit dwells can be a frightening thing, more frightening by far than those poor folks who declare on talk shows, “I hate my body!” and plead for some expert to “make them over” or “make them up” so that they might be free of the horror of seeing themselves in the morning mirror.

As far as I know, no one has ever appeared on Oprah declaring, “I hate my soul,” begging for a spiritual makeover that could erase the scars from their past excess, that could cool the fever of hidden passion. Unfortunately, there is no one who can do such repairs to our internal complexion except ourselves, and before we can do that, we must get over the fear of looking at ourselves.

Admittedly, it sometimes takes great heroism to face ourselves, but this we must do. It is in our inner self that we will find the person that we actually are, not the person that we sometimes pretend to be externally. It is in our inner self that we will find that which
in ourselves will never perish. Only there will we discover our true beauty, our true value. It is only there that in this life we will come closest to the God who made us in the likeness of his beauty, who made our spirit to be immortal, who gave us our surpassing worth by valuing us through his love. And the best part of all this is that when we enter into ourselves and humbly accept the fact of our imperfections, we find there no one who would condemn us (Sermon 169, 18).

In the search for one’s true self, Augustine makes an interesting distinction between what we “think” we are and what we “know” we are (The Trinity, 10.16). We often create bloated and glorious pictures of ourselves, fabrications based on what we would like to be or what we dream we actually are. At the same time, sometimes hidden deep within ourselves, there are those facts about ourselves that we indeed know about ourselves but try to avoid because they are unpleasant or humbling.

There is often a big difference between what we think we are and what we should know we are. Thus, ...

... We may think that we have arrived at the pinnacle of virtue, but we should know that the only thing standing in the way of our supposedly saintly self from becoming a satyr is the providence and grace of God.

... We may think that we are not getting old, but we should know the truth of the matter each morning as we try to lift our resistant body from its arthritic sleep.

... We may think that we will never die, but looking at the constantly passing tide of time around us and feeling the gradual deterioration inside us, we should know the fact that each day of life is a step towards death.

... We may think that someday we will be wealthy, that someday we will control the world, that someday we will find the true love of our lives, but we should know that all of these are only possibilities and some of them are quite remote.

It is thus that we can think of things that never were and willfully forget nasty things that actually were. It is easy to do. In order to forget, all we need do is not pay attention. For example, sometimes (especially at long meetings) people talk to us and we have no idea what they are saying because our minds are elsewhere. Our mind must have the permission of our will before it can pay attention to our present or remember our past (The Trinity, 11.15). It is not difficult to forget when others tell us how rotten we are and remember only their praises. Indeed, such selective attention and remembering may be the source of much of our daily peace.

This creative remembering of a self that “never was” is an innocent diversion as long as it does not stand in the way of seeing myself for what I am now. My self is not only my present state but also my past history, and misrepresenting the latter can be just as destructive as ignoring the former. Like it or not, I am a continuum and an understanding of what the true “ME” is NOW rests on an honest awareness of my PAST. I am my history and to see myself now I must try to remember honestly what I have been, as disconcerting as that memory may sometimes be.
As Augustine tried to do in his *Confessions*, I must not hide from myself the foibles of my youth or the passions of my adolescence or the excesses of my young adulthood or the thirst for fame and power of my productive years. I must not forget my past because the residue of these past times, be they good or bad, remains a part of my self now. The vices overcome and virtues developed are a sign of present strength and the passions still unconquered are a sign of my continuing weakness.

The nobility of my present self is created as much by vices conquered as virtues maintained. It is good to remember that and not live my days as a “make-believe” self. The miracle of my present true self is that I have somehow survived my history without too much damage to myself or others. Facing myself past and present honestly, I can be thankful for the folly that might have been while regretting the stupidity that sometimes was.

**WHAT THEN CAN I KNOW ABOUT MYSELF?**

Once I begin to look at myself honestly, my experience and my faith reveal some characteristics which (I know) are common to all of us ... indeed common to the whole human race as it exists now in these days after Eden.

**THE CRACKED SELF**

Let us start with the humbling fact that we are all somewhat “broken.” As Augustine and Paul tell us, we have been put in the furnace of time and have come out *half-cracked* (*Commentary on Psalm 99*, 11).

As a result, the pursuit of eternal happiness is for every one of us a story telling of frequent starts and stops. With the exception of Mary, the mother of Jesus, every human life is the tale of twisting and turning down the road to heaven. We do not make our way through life like an arrow plummeting straight and true towards the goal. We are more like *TOPS*, spinning perilously down the path, lurching now to one side and now to the other, sometimes falling off as we lose momentum, needing to be picked up and gently nudged towards our destiny.

Augustine was convinced that, because of our inborn cracks that cloud our mind and weaken our will, none of us can live a life entirely free of sin (*Sermon 181*, 1). The ordinary human being, indeed every human being, will fall short of the perfect life. The best that humans can accomplish is to stumble through time and enter eternity in a slightly charred condition. They will have “survived” rather than conquered.

The beginning of salvation for these slightly singed souls is in humbly admitting that they are indeed cracked. To do this they need to be cured of the misconception that they do not need the help of God to change their lives (*Sermon 130A*, 6-9). For them to pretend otherwise would be both disastrous and silly. It would be like going into a
doctor’s office and pointing out what is right rather than what is wrong (Commentary on Psalm 32/2, 12).

But such an admission of weakness is not always easy. To do it, we need a little help from our divine friend.

THE GRACE-FILLED SELF

Augustine did not need to read scripture to discover the fact that he was “cracked.” He had proven that fact by his own life. But after his conversion to Christ, he came to see that the reason why, despite his weakness, he was sometimes able to do the right thing was because of a second fact about himself. He was still "cracked," to be sure, but he was also “grace-filled.” He came to realize that he was not alone in his battle to reach his ultimate end, perfect happiness with God in heaven. He had help from God not only to know the right thing to do, but to choose to do it once known.

Once he recognized the fact that his life was indeed grace-filled, he suddenly realized a third wonderful fact about himself: God lived in the depths of his self. As he wrote to the grieving widow Italica:

You must not think of yourself as left alone. Christ lives deep inside you and is present in your heart through faith. (Letter 92, 1)

THE FRAGILE SELF

It is good that God is with us because our voyage of self-discovery quickly reveals the distressing fact that we are fragile beings, held in existence only by the support of a benevolent God (Sermon 335B, 4).

Augustine describes our existence here on earth as being more fragile than a spider’s web. A web is secure as long as it is not touched, but we cannot continue to exist unless we are touched and supported by a force beyond us (Commentary on Psalm 38, 18). We are something like party balloons temporarily expanded to enhance a festive gathering. The delicate air of “being” easily escapes if not preserved by the gentle pressure of God’s hand. It is for this reason that Augustine described our earthly lives as fleeting as rising smoke (Sermon 216, 4).

No matter how satisfying this life is, I must be ready to move beyond it. I must not reject my life now, tenuous as it may be, but also, I must not be too attached. It is only reasonable for me to be ready for the thread that holds me alive to finally break. It makes sense to follow Augustine’s sage advice:

Learn how to let go of the world before it lets go of you. (Sermon 125, 11)
THE IMPERISHABLE SELF

Being able to let go of this life becomes especially important, once we recognize a further fact about ourselves revealed by faith. Mortal we may be in body, but in our spirit, we are imperishable.

Believing in my immortality does not make my life any less fragile. But now, it appears to me not as a short thin line in human history, a mark of no consequence in the scheme of things, an existence that will cease without causing great ripples in the stream of time. Now I see it as a minute dot at the beginning of a noble line that is infinite in length. From this perspective I can see that what happens in this life is not as important as what will happen in that eternal life after death (Sermon 65, 8).

The message of faith is that I am fragile, to be sure, but I am also a being with infinite possibilities. For each of us, the words Paul wrote to the Romans can become true:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, then he who raised Jesus from the dead will bring your mortal body to life also, through his Spirit dwelling in you. (Romans 8, 10-11)

THE BEAUTY OF MY “SELF”

This is a further fact that the journey into self (when enlightened by faith) should reveal. We and every human being is beautiful! and this in a very special way (Letter 205, 1).

The difference between the grandeur of the human and the grandeur of the rest of the universe comes down to this: The non-human universe is beautiful because it was made through the “likeness” of the beauty that is God; the human spirit is beautiful because it was made as a reflection of the “likeness” of God (Incomplete Commentary on Genesis, 16.59).

Indeed the essential beauty of the human being cannot be destroyed by the ravages of passing time. We grow old only on the outside. As Augustine wrote to his friend Paulina:

The inner self is renewed day by day, even though the outer self is falling apart. The trick is to raise up the spirit of that inner self where you will not die when your outer self begins to deteriorate. In your inner self you will not waste away even when your life has become weighed down with years. (Letter 147, 2)

Inside, the beauty of the spirit remains always young. The inner self can be reborn even as the outer self decays day after day (On True Religion, 40.74). Even in our old age, we can remain as young in spirit as a child (Commentary on Psalm 112, 2).

We should try our best to grasp the truth of our inner beauty because if we never grasp its wonder, it will be hard for us to begin to love ourselves. If we declare, “I hate myself,”
it can be only because we have discovered no beauty, no value anywhere in our person. We have looked at our inner self and have found nothing to love.

This indeed is a sad state of affairs because only by recognizing the beauty of our inner self can we be encouraged to choose life and look forward with anticipation to a life that goes on forever. In the beauty of our inner selves we will discover the hand of the God who made us to be beautiful. Only in recognizing our inner beauty can we come to see our true value.

**THE VALUE OF MY “SELF”**

We humans are the best things in creation and we are all equal in this noble position. There are no “second class” human beings precisely because all humans have the same nature which reflects God. Our glory is that we carry within us the image of the Divine. Our burden is that we carry that precious image in a vessel that is imperfect. But even in our somewhat disabled existence, a life that has bruised us in its passing, we are still alive and are still able to make decisions that can create a better future in eternity.

All of creation is good but we are the best and have within our power to act that way. It is for this reason that, however disreputable we may seem to be to ourselves and others, we may always apply to ourselves the sentiments of Augustine:

> If you are going to praise the works of God, you should begin with yourself for you too are a work of God. (Commentary on Psalm 144, 7)

**THE LOVE OF SELF**

If we have come at last to value ourselves, to respect the goodness in ourselves, then we are prepared to take the next step: to love ourselves. There are good reasons for doing so. Faith tells me that the only reason why I as an individual have the ability to love is because God himself has given me the power to love (Sermon 34, 2). God has also supplied the highest object worthy of my love by revealing himself through the Incarnation. In the person of Jesus Christ, God shows (though “through a glass darkly”) something of the goodness and mercy and gentleness of Divinity. Finally, through the influence of grace, God supports my act of love by influencing me to love what should be loved, drawing me out of myself by making love of neighbor and God more desirable than staying selfishly involved only in myself, an egocentrism which would cause me to lose myself forever (Sermon 34, 7).

We must find some beauty in the self if we are to love it, and beauty is created by love. Augustine was convinced that, as hideous as human beings may become because of sin, they should always remember that God has made every person’s soul beautiful (Commentary on the Epistle of John, 9.1.1). It is a strange and wonderful thought: God
makes our ugliness to be beautiful. That is exactly what Jesus Christ, the Son of God, did through his life and death. He came in his beauty to take up our ugliness and destroy it.

If we cannot love ourselves it is because of our own weakness, our own “cracks.” This is indeed unfortunate because only when a balanced and appropriate love for self has been accomplished, will we be ready to take the next step in our search for and union with God. Before we can escape from self in a productive way, we must love our starting point: the depths of our own self.

**FINAL CHALLENGE: FORGETTING & ESCAPING SELF**

But we cannot stay inside our “selves,” suddenly enthralled by the beauty we find there. Having come to appreciate ourselves, in order to take the next step towards God and final happiness, we must now forget about ourselves and move on. This is necessary because perfect happiness cannot be found in our isolated self any more than it can be found in the fleeting goods of the external world. In some way or other, after all of our strenuous effort to get in touch with ourselves, we must now “forget” ourselves and move beyond the cramped borders of our own person. We must turn our attention to other persons and to God. It is only by thus “forgetting” self that we can discover the fullness of self, the self now not isolated in some solitary box but embraced by and embracing divine and human lovers.

Forgetting self establishes the condition for moving farther in our search for perfect happiness but the force that will actually move us is our love for those beyond ourselves. It is a strange but true fact: We can only make ourselves holy by emptying ourselves of ourselves, escaping ourselves and reaching for that one good that will perfect us, the good that is God. Augustine expressed this truth in the advice he gave to his friends in a sermon. He told them:

> Don’t stay trapped inside yourself. Rise above yourself and place yourself in the hands of the God who made you. I have the audacity to tell you that you indeed must die to self. This is necessary because if you have died with Christ, then you will seek only those heavenly goods that are far above yourself. (Sermon 153, 9)

The fact of the matter is that we cannot achieve happiness unless we become like gods, becoming that sacred place created by our sacrificial love for those beyond us. This is the place where God dwells in time. It is the place where we will eventually come to enjoy God forever in eternity.

How we reach that place through love of others and love of God is a complex topic, and its discussion must be reserved for another time and another place. But if we have discovered our true self and are prepared to move on, we will have accomplished the first part of Augustine’s prayer and be well on the way to accomplishing the second:

> O unchanging God, let me know myself; let me know you. (Soliloquies, 2.1.1)
A PRACTICAL POST-SCRIPT

Facing up to self is not only the first step in our journey to the vision of God. It is also the foundation for any peace that we can find in this world. Augustine said that only when we have peace within can that peace spread to the family, the community and the world at large (City of God, 19.13.1).

Augustine told his people an important principle about dealing with life. He said to them:

People say, “The times are evil! the times are troubled!” But we ourselves are the time. Whatever we are like, that’s what the times are like. Let us live good lives and the times will become good. (Sermon 80, 8)

We have no control over our times: whether we will get a good job, whether we will find a true love, whether we will get sick, whether we will die, whether our children will have a happy life, and (yes) whether our country will go to war. We have little control over what people, even our leaders, will do.

All that we can control is how we react to the times of our lives ... whether we can preserve a modicum of peace within during the good times and bad times. But to do that we must first “know ourselves,” accepting our condition, realizing that in good times and bad God lives within us and “willy-nilly” is dragging us into the future.

When I was little, I used to fear riding the big roller coaster in Wildwood, New Jersey. It was not too bad when I was going up. I was at peace, enthralled by the sights and the exhilaration of being at the top. It was when we plummeted back to earth that I began to scream. I was plunging into the depths and I seemed to have no control over my destiny. I learned to develop an inner peace by never again going near that instrument of torture with its uncontrollable ups and downs.

Unfortunately, we cannot avoid the ups and downs of this roller coaster that we call life. All we can do is try to develop that inner peace that allows us to deal with both the good times and bad times ... to realize that in good times and bad we are of value, we are loved, we are not alone on our life’s ride.

As I learned on my roller-coaster experience, even the most frightening, terrible ride must come to an end. The ride will be over, and I will step happily from this little vessel that is my life just now into the arms of infinite love. With that conviction, we may not be able to bring peace to the world, but we may be able to survive our wars with some degree of peace deep within our very selves.
Week Three: Let Me Know You—Steps in Discovering the Hidden God

Presented by Donald X. Burt, OSA, Wednesday, March 26, 2003

Introduction: Climbing the Mountain

Three of the four gospel writers tell the story of the first time human beings were called to ascend a mountain to see the transfigured Jesus-God. Matthew gives the following description of the event:

Six days after his first prediction of his passion and death, Jesus took Peter, James and his brother John, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. There he was transfigured before them. And his face shone as the sun, and his garments became white as snow. And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elias talking together with him. Then Peter addressed Jesus, saying, “Lord it is good for us to be here!” (Matt 17:1-4)

I have always felt that “climbing a mountain” is a fitting analogy for the story of our lives. All of us are searching for some “hill of transfiguration” and would dearly like to receive an invitation like the one given by Jesus to his three friends, the invitation to climb with him to the top of a mountain where, finally, we could see the glory that is God.

Some, like Albert Camus, were convinced that such a glorious mountain does not exist. The only mountain we have to climb in this life is the mountain of our daily tasks, a mountain that promises not glory but only frustration. We, like the doomed Sisyphus in the ancient myth, are condemned to push the rock of our burdens up the side of the mountain only to have it roll back down to the bottom at the end of the day, waiting for us to begin our struggles again the next morning.

Augustine disagreed with this pessimistic view. He was convinced that God exists and that, though hidden, he could be found. There is a mountain of “transfiguration” that even the ordinary human being can climb to discover a still hidden God. Through his reading of Sacred Scripture, Augustine came to see that the steps that lead to the “vision” of God had been outlined long before by the Old Testament prophet Isaiah (Isa 11:2-3). They are the stages in life that have come to be called the Gifts of the Holy Ghost.

In ordinary language, these stages in our ascent to God can be described as periods of Darkness, Listening, Knowledge, Bravery, Love and Purification, culminating in a Wisdom whereby at last we come to perceive the truth that is God. Today I would like to offer some brief reflections on these various stages in our search for God.
Fear of the Lord (Darkness)

My search for the hidden God begins in darkness. The emptiness I feel is therapeutic because if I were not empty, there would be no need for something to fill me up. If I were not dissatisfied in some way with my present condition, there would be no urge to seek something more. If I did not feel empty despite all the things I have, I would not search for something beyond.

This sense of empty absence in our lives may occur in various ways. In its most radical form, it occurs in a sudden disbelief in any God, any infinite being out there who truly cares about my life. It is a sudden conviction that literally my life is going nowhere because there is no final where to go, no place, no condition that will bring that perfect happiness which I so desperately desire. Life does not have a goal, only an extent. I live out my allotted days and then I die and that's the end of it ... and the end of ME!

In the last 18 years of her life, St. Thérèse of Lisieux (the “Little Flower”) seems to have experienced such times of darkness. She describes her darkness as follows:

He (God) permitted my soul to be invaded by the thickest darkness so that the thought of heaven, up until then so sweet to me, seemed to be just a cause of more torment. It seemed to me that the darkness mocked me, saying:

You dream about a land of light, about a homeland permeated by the sweetest perfumes. You are dreaming about the eternal possession of the Creator of all these marvels. You believe that one day you will walk out of this fog that surrounds you! Well, I say to you, “In your darkness rejoice in your coming death, a death which will give you not what you hope for but a night still more profound, the NIGHT OF NOTHINGNESS.” (Quoted in Mary Frohlich, H.M., “Desolation and Doctrine in Thérèse of Lisieux,” Theological Studies, vol 61 [2000] p. 264)

Augustine was convinced that, though the person going through such darkness is not aware of it, it is the grace of God that is pushing them beyond their accustomed way of living ... not by presenting (as yet) a more attractive alternative, but simply by revealing how empty is the alternative that they have chosen. The darkness is God calling them to a new form of life.

Whenever such darkness comes upon us, we become aware that our previous way of living is no longer satisfactory. We are like a butterfly tentatively emerging from its comfortable but confining cocoon, slowly expanding our wings for our flight into the next stage of our lives. By the grace of God, in our continuing darkness we are somehow prepared to enter into the next phase of our climb to the hidden God: a period of pious listening.
Piety (Listening)

Piety is the gift of the Holy Spirit through which we are able to patiently wait for some guidance in choosing what we should do to move on with our lives. Augustine believed that this docile attitude of patient listening is best exemplified by Job in the Old Testament, sitting quietly after losing most of what mattered to him, refusing to condemn God or anyone else, waiting for guidance, ready to yield to the will of God however it comes and whatever direction it gives (Sermon 157, 2).

Augustine believed that it takes a truly docile mind to hear and act on the message sent to us by God through our reading of the Sacred Scriptures (Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount 1.3.10)

Docility is obviously required when we cannot understand the message conveyed by the words. At such a time of confusion we must humbly accept the fact that the words sometimes contain great mysteries that can only be understood after a long period of study or cannot be understood at all.

Docility is also required when we think we do understand the message but are unwilling to accept the “hard” course it demands. For example, God may be telling me clearly that I must change my whole way of life. Faced with such a “hard saying,” I may gently demur and read into the message my own meaning, thinking that my interpretation certainly makes more sense.

If I have the gift of pious listening, I am able to wait quietly with an attitude of acceptance for whatever direction may come, firmly believing that, through the Providence of God, I will have the strength to do whatever is demanded of me. It is not easy. Augustine heard the call of God to change his life and become converted to Christ, but it took him two more years for him to accept the message and to do what it directed. His hesitation caused him to pray: “Late have I loved you, Lord; late have I loved you” (Confessions 10.27.38).

Knowledge

Once I accept with humility the fact that I need to listen to someone else, that I am indeed immersed in darkness and that I need some outside force to illuminate my mind and help me discover what I should do next, I am ready to receive the next gift of the Holy Spirit the gift of knowledge.

This is the first positive step towards that wisdom which brings the vision and love of the no-longer-hidden God. Through the words and life of Jesus Christ, I begin to get some inkling of what God is like. I begin to see what sort of life I must lead to become united with that God, to climb the mountain of transfiguration to find that peak where God will be revealed.
But also, I begin to see and accept the good and bad in myself and the world. The honors and loves and pleasures that had been so much a part of my life in the past are now seen as they truly are: wonderful goods, to be sure, but goods that are as fragile and as passing as the early morning fog on a warming sea.

My spirit is beginning to soar and dream of heaven, but the beauty of this earth, the delights of my “earthiness” still pull me back. I can no longer enjoy them as I used to because I have recognized their emptiness, but I cannot yet rejoice in the pleasures of the spirit because I am not yet free of the earth. I have not yet been liberated from myself and I am torn in many directions. Distressed with my condition, my crackedness, I begin to lose hope. It is then that I need the next gift of the Spirit, the gift of fortitude.

Fortitude

As we go through life, there are many times we need to be brave in the face of troubling or confusing situations. For example:

1. We need the bravery to look honestly at ourselves, facing both our beauty and our blemishes.

2. Sometimes we need the bravery to admit that we are in the wrong sort of life and then not to persevere in it but go out on a limb and try something new.

3. Sometimes we need the bravery to persevere in a life which is probably the right one but is beginning to be a burden.

4. Sometimes we need the bravery to continue to plow ahead on our chosen path even though the end of the road, where we are going, is not completely clear.

5. Sometimes we need the bravery to continue on the road when the journey is becoming difficult, when proceeding further causes pain, distress, anxiety and various other bad things.

At this stage of my journey I have begun to recognize my goal, the peak of the mountain where God dwells, and to recognize how far I am away from the perfection that would allow me to reach the heights. At his point in my journey, I need the bravery to pray. I need to pray for faith to believe in the unseen God. I need to pray for a hope that will enable me to continue prayer even when there is no dramatic response. I need to pray for a charity to help me love the “great good God” that I believe, and hope is “out there” somewhere but whom I have yet to experience.
Counsel

I pray for some help from one who is stronger than myself. In my continuing weakened condition, I ask, “What am I to do?” The answer is given through the next gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of Counsel. The advice given is quite reasonable. Augustine phrases it as follows:

If you wish to be helped by someone stronger than yourself, you must help those who are weaker than yourself. (Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, 1.3.10)

Since forgiveness is the most powerful expression of love, if we want to be forgiven by God, we must first reach out in love and forgive others the real or apparent harm they have done to us.

Since I cannot be sure that I am loving God directly (since he is still hidden), I at least can show my wish to love the unseen God by loving those whom I do see, those human reflections of God that surround me. Although my love for the hidden God may still be developing, my wish to love him can be manifested by my effort to observe the commandment given my Jesus:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. (John, 15:12)

Augustine explains the reason for this commandment as follows:

You do not now see God, but by loving your neighbor you will make yourself worthy to see him. By loving your neighbor, you cleanse your eyes so that someday you will be able to see God. (Commentary on the Epistle of John, 17.8)

How are we to express our love for others? The answer is (I believe) summed up in the so-called “DO NO HARM” principle. It commands two things:

1. As far as reasonably possible, do not harm others... at least by forgiving them any harm they have done to us.

2. As far as possible, rescue others from harm by trying to help them when they are in need or at least having compassion for them in their troubles.

The measure of the perfection of our application of these two principles will be the extent to which we apply it not only to our friends but even to our enemies. As Augustine makes clear, the love of others that leads to union with God is not to be restricted to any special group of human being ... Christian or non-Christian, man or woman. No race is to be preferred over any other.

Christ has commanded: “We must love our neighbor as ourselves.” It is clear that the word “neighbor” embraces every human being. We are all sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, all members of the same species. As a result (Augustine says):
Every human being is the neighbor of every human being. (On Christian Discipline, 3)

This fact seems confirmed by the words of Jesus Christ himself when he said: “Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me!” There is no indication that Christ meant to restrict his meaning to any one class of humans.

Through the perfection of my love for others, I have set the stage for the: Final Purification of My Spirit, which is contained in the Gift of the Holy Spirit called understanding.

Understanding

As I enter this new stage in my progress towards the vision and love of the hidden God, I have already gone through a purification whereby I have more or less cleansed myself of some of the excessive love of self and the world that had been holding me back from the summit of the mountain of transfiguration. But now the “love of others” so laboriously developed in the last stage must itself be perfected. It must be purified from such imperfections as loving others in the wrong way, loving them too much, loving them too possessively, loving them only for the pleasure they give to us.

This final purification of my self is called the gift of understanding because it begins to open my eyes to the vision of God. It is a healing of the eye of my spirit which has been clouded over by the residue of past misadventures. It is as though I had been looking too long at the sun. Even if I have now withdrawn my gaze from that shiny attraction, I am still blinded by the experience. My eye, though it is no longer looking in the wrong direction, is still blinded by its past experience. It must be healed before I can see the reality around me. Finally purified as best I can be, I am ready to receive that final gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of wisdom.

Wisdom: Waiting on the Mountain

In some way, the person who achieves the divine gift of wisdom in this life will “see God,” will “see the Truth,” will see that “eternal light that is God.” But still the vision will not be perfectly clear. As Augustine remarks:

The beauty of this light is still said to be seen “in a riddle and through a mirror” (1 Corinthians, 13:12). It is indeed becoming more evident to us on our pilgrim way, but we must still walk more by faith than by sight. (On Christian Doctrine, 2.7.11)

Assisted by the grace of God, we may have been able to climb our own hill of transfiguration and to finally appreciate the truth of the “human Christ,” but there is no guarantee that we will be “lifted up” any further. It is up to God to take us the rest of the
way to the vision of Jesus-God transfigured before us. Reaching the top of the mountain, all we can do is wait.

Simone Weil describes the need for such prayerful passivity as follows:

There are people who try to raise their souls like a man continually taking standing jumps in the hopes that, if he jumps higher every day, a time may come when he will no longer fall back but will go right up to the sky. It is not in our power to travel in a vertical direction. But we need not search for God, only change the direction of our gaze. It is for him to search for us. (Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, Emma Craufurd trans. [New York: Harper-Colophon Books, 1973], pp. 194, 216)

We should not be distressed if we have tried our best to climb the mountain of transfiguration and are still waiting to be “lifted up.” There can be a certain peace in such patient waiting. We have done all we can do. It is up to God to move us further.

Like a little baby clutching the leg of its mother, we stand and wait to be carried, realizing that there is now nothing we can do to determine our future. We are like those patient folks described by Simone Weil:

They do not turn toward God. God himself sets their faces in the right direction. It is for them to remain motionless, without averting their eyes, listening ceaselessly, and waiting. If after a long period of waiting God allows them to have an indistinct intuition of his light or even reveals himself in person, it is only for an instant. Once more they have to remain still, attentive, inactive, crying out only when their desire cannot be contained. (Simone Weil, op. cit., p. 211)

Is it possible to still have joy while waiting for God to come and “lift us up”? The answer must be “yes.” There is a quiet joy possessed by all good people who have tried their best to climb the mountain from darkness to wisdom by living a decent life. It is a peace that comes from a hope expressed by Augustine in the question:

Will he who gave so great assurances while I was on my journey abandon me on my arrival? (*Commentary on Psalm* 26/2, 10)

As we wait for God to carry us to the heavens, we may legitimately ask, “Besides this patient waiting, what am I supposed to do with the rest of my life? I know that I must love God but how can I truly be said to ‘love’ this God who is still hidden and will likely remain hidden this side of death?”

The answer is that we must turn our love towards those whom we can see, those with whom we share humanity. Augustine puts it this way:

How should we prepare for loving God? By loving each other! You may say to me, “I have not seen God.” Can you say to me, “I have not seen other human beings?” Love each other! If you love the human whom you see, you will love
God too at the same time; for you will see love itself, the love that is the God who dwells within each of us. (Commentary on the Epistle of John, 5.7.2)

If we are able to love others with some degree of unselfish love, a pure love not dictated by our own self-love, then we are at least beginning to love God through them. This is the clear message the apostle John sent to his followers:

It is true that no one has ever seen God but if we love one another, God lives in us. God IS love and anyone who lives with love lives in God and God lives in them. (1 John 4:7-21)

Even though we cannot see the God of love, at least our love can be focused on the neighbor that we can see, doing those pedestrian things we sometimes do for those we care about. The rule of love is simple:

“IF WE CANNOT FEEL THE LOVE OF GOD, AT LEAST WE CAN BE KIND TO EACH OTHER.”

Such was the conclusion reached by St. Thérèse of Lisieux when at the end of her life she no longer could sense the intimate presence of God. Mary Frohlich describes this period in Therese’s life as follows:

Feeling herself at an immeasurable distance from God, she abandoned herself to letting God love through her all those who are “nothing.” She shifted her attention from desire for a heaven “elsewhere” to a passion to be involved in, to throw herself into the present moment, a moment composed only of love. She no longer expected to encounter the “essence” of God. Instead she dedicated herself to simply living neighborly charity in the ordinary “here and now.” (Mary Frohlich, H.M., “Desolation and Doctrine in Thérèse of Lisieux,” Theological Studies, vol 61 [2000], pp. 270, 274)

There is always something that each one of us can do for those we meet on our pilgrimage to heaven. At very least, by lovingly serving others here on earth, we prepare ourselves to love the God whom we will eventually see. In loving others, we can come to know something about God. Though the best we can achieve is to see (like Moses) “the back parts of God,” it is a beginning (The Trinity, 2.17.28).

In the meantime, we are at peace. We now know that we are not alone. We are surrounded by those we love. We are accompanied by the still-hidden God who lives in them and who will stay close to us as we journey on through all the rest of the days of our lives. When we reach out to others in love, we make true for ourselves the happy fact preached so long ago by Augustine:

Wherever you go on earth, however long you remain, the Lord is close to you. So don’t worry about anything. The Lord is always nearby. (Sermon 171, 5)
Epilogue

The seven stages in the ascent to the vision of God are not mutually exclusive. In the midst of the ecstasy of human love, there may be fear. If we have scaled the heights to the place where God dwells, we still may suddenly be enveloped in darkness. For most of us, all of the stages may well be mixed together as long as we live, a succession of rising to the top of the mountain of transfiguration and falling again into the dark valley below.

The hope-filled message of faith is that God is already present in us if we are trying to deal with whatever stage is ours at the moment: hoping in darkness, listening with an open mind, learning with humility, praying bravely, loving others unselfishly, purifying our desires unwaveringly, patiently waiting for the still unknown God to come. Any and all of these noble acts would be impossible without the support of God’s uplifting grace illuminating our mind and strengthening our will.

We may never achieve any direct vision of God in this life. Even if we have been able to struggle to the top of the mountain by living decent lives as best we could. We may never be “lifted up,” we may never see the vision of the glorified Christ that was given to the three apostles on the hill of transfiguration. Does this mean that we have not received the gift of wisdom? The answer is “no.” It just means that wisdom must manifest itself in us through our patient acceptance of God’s will.

It is consoling to realize that the guarantee that we shall eventually see God for all eternity does not depend on whether we have had some mystical experience of him in this life. Rather it is determined by our continuing struggle to be worthy to receive that vision, by our struggle to keep our focus on what is above rather than what is below, by our continuing struggle against the temptation to turn back in despair.

We prepare to see and love God by trying to live a decent life, and it is these efforts that insure our salvation. A mystical experience of God, a vision of God, an overpowering feeling of love for God, all of these are gifts that God may (or may not) give to us. The gift that we give to him is our effort to scale the mountain. It is up to him to take us the rest of the way and he may not do that until the moment of our death. Indeed, we may never get much beyond the first stage, the darkness of not knowing. Only after death will all darkness disappear. Only then will we realize that we have been saved by our own efforts and God’s grace, not by moments of ecstatic vision granted to us in this life.

I have never seen the hidden God, but the words of the saints of the past and the experience of the saints of the present have given me hope and, in that hope, I find the beginning of happiness. Like the little “Donald-child” waiting for the father to start the family car for the trip to the seashore, I am happy anticipating the sweetness of the endless ice cream that is sure to come.
INTRODUCTION: LIFE IN A HOSPICE

In a sermon to his people in the fifth century Augustine said:

> We are now travelers on a journey. We cannot stay in this place forever. We are on our way, not yet home. Our present state is one of hopeful anticipation, not yet unending enjoyment. We must run without laziness or respite so that we may at last arrive at our destination. (Sermon 103, 1)

Some 1500 years later, when I was chaplain at a small New England College, I gave a sermon that began this way: “Today the doctors told me that I am going to die.”

Unfortunately (but happily, because it showed that I was loved), my announcement caused consternation. I was, after all, only 30 years old with a freshly minted PhD in philosophy and a lifetime to pursue wisdom! I was too young to die (or so they thought)!

Now, in my eighth decade with my philosophy career behind me (44 years of pursuing wisdom was quite enough), I am not sure that the reaction would be the same. Now, saying “I am going to die” might only prompt the response “Has anybody claimed your apartment yet?” Sad to say, when you reach “geezerhood,” announcing your coming death may cause regret but little surprise.

The point of my announcement to the students when I was still a “young mover and shaker” was simply that everybody is going to die someday. The only issue not resolved is when and how. This should not come as an extraordinary revelation for anyone who is a realist. St. Augustine made this point over and over again in his sermons to his people. His message to them (and to us) is quite simple:

> All of us are moving towards death. Indeed, we begin to die the moment we are conceived because we are put on a road that can lead nowhere else.

His favorite metaphor for this life of ours was taken from the story of the Good Samaritan. Like the poor fellow rescued by the Samaritan, we are all living in a Hospice, a temporary home for travelers who are passing through. We must eventually “check out” someday and make our exit through the doors of death. The longer we live, the closer we come to that momentous moment, a “moment” because it lasts for only an instant and “momentous” because it is the point at which we begin our eternal life beyond death.
THE CERTAINTY OF DEATH

Nothing can be done about the fact that we will someday die. Augustine uses the analogy of an oil lamp to make this point. A lamp is filled with light only because it is constantly burning off its resource of oil. If it burns a long time, the light begins to flicker and die as its source of energy is used up. The light can be kept burning only by supplying new oil. However, the time will come for every lamp when its wick dissolves and its light dies forever. So too it is with us. Even at the brightest and most vigorous moments of our lives, our wick (our body) is slowly being eaten away by time and by use (Sermon 362, 11).

Augustine’s analysis makes some sense. We humans are indeed much like living lamps. We must take nourishment over a lifetime in order to maintain our vital activities. It might seem to the simple-minded that as long as we have enough to eat and drink, our life can go on forever. But this cannot happen. The very vessel in which the vital activity is carried on is itself eroding, wearing down, and wearing away. The day will come when it can no longer support the flame of life, no matter how much nourishment is poured into it. When that day comes, the body falls apart, the soul escapes and the human dies.

Understandably, most of us try to avoid facing this fact as long as we can. It is hard to leave life when the party is still going on. We are like two friends of mine who left their wedding reception with much joy only to return an hour later. A short distance down the road, they realized that there was more assured fun at the motel they had left behind than in the unknown territory where they were going. So too when we face the prospect of leaving this life, we sometimes try to put off our leaving as long as possible, paying great sums of energy and capital to stay just a few more days in this Inn for Travelers, this Hospice. But the effort is of little use. We become like little children sticking their hands out the window of a speeding car, trying desperately to slow its progress towards the hated school.

IS THERE AN “AFTER-LIFE”?

Because we are so certain that someday we will die, most of us would like to be just as certain about what comes after life. Is there life after death? Are we traveling to “something” or to a “nothingness”? Unlike the motels of our earthly travels, the Hospice which is the place of our life before death takes no open-ended reservations. We could be asked to leave at any time. But leave to what?

Most of us would not be satisfied to exit life into oblivion. I for one want to exit this Hospice into an eternally vibrant life, a life that has all of the joys and none of sorrows of this life! Augustine agrees with me. One day he told his friends:

This life is sweet, and nobody wants to end it, wretched though it sometimes is. What then must a blessed life be like considering that we cannot help loving this one with all its miseries: its disappointments, its toil, its sickness, its real sadness,
its phony cheerfulness, its prayers for relief, its fear of temptation and tribulation? Who can possibly have the eloquence to adequately describe the sometime miseries of this life? But we love it all the same. (Sermon 335B, 3)

Loving this life with all its imperfection, we dream and hope for a life that is even better, which indeed is perfect because it brings the permanent satisfaction of all of our desires (The Trinity, 13.8.11).

THE PROMISE OF RESURRECTION

But is such a dream realistic considering what happens to our poor old bodies once we die? Augustine tried to console his listeners with the happy fact that not only is death not the end of us; it is not even the end of our body. He told them:

When you die your flesh will be stripped away for a while but will come back to you at the end of time. This is going to happen whether you like it or not. You are not going to rise from the grave because you want to; nor will your “not wanting to” prevent it from happening. Even if you don’t believe in your eventual resurrection, you will still rise from the grave “willy-nilly.” (Sermon 344, 4)

Augustine’s words are consoling to me because I am one of those who would like to rise from the dead. The assurance of ancient Greeks like Socrates and Plato that my soul will live forever is all well and good, but it is not enough to make me look forward to my after-life experience. Nor is their advice on how to achieve a good after-life too consoling. Their exhortation to purify the mind, increase knowledge, and reach out for sublime wisdom is not too attractive to ordinary “clods” like me. Their heaven seems reserved only for the intellectual elite while the rest of us “ordinary folk” seem destined to swim through various stages of reincarnation in the “cave” below.

In order to make me happy, I need assurance that after death I will continue to exist “with” my body because (as Augustine observed),

My soul loves life and hates death and it does not want death to happen even to my body. (Sermon 344, 4)

If I had to leave this old body behind forever when I pass through the doors of this Hospice, it would be like checking out of a hotel and being told to leave all my baggage behind. I would leave with sadness if I could not take that body with me which was such an important part of my pleasure during my days here at this Inn. Leaving, I would feel naked and apprehensive because I was forced to leave part of myself behind with no assurance that I would ever see it again. My body may not be the most important part of me, but over seven decades I have gotten used to it, and now it is hard to imagine living without it.

The message of Christianity that someday we shall rise again gives us great hope as we live out our dying life just now. We want to live and we want to live forever happy in
body and soul. The resurrection of Christ gives us that hope, the hope that we too can rise one day to a blessed life. We know this will happen because he has shown us that he has the power over death and he has promised that he will use that power to bring us back whole and entire at the end of time. As Augustine assured his people long ago:

> Great indeed the power by which Jesus was able not to die; but greater still was the loving kindness by which he was willing to die. The reason why he did out of loving kindness what by power he was able not to do was to give us a basis for believing in our own resurrection. He wanted to show that the perishable, mortal element that he took upon himself for our sakes would be able to rise again. He did this so that we might hope to do the same thing. (Sermon 362, 12)

Our faith in Jesus and our belief in his resurrection gives us the hope that someday we too shall rise from the dead ... body and soul. But the question remains: “Rise to what?”

**HEAVEN OR HELL: TWO POSSIBILITIES**

For those who believe in the promises of Jesus-God, the one certainty in the midst of this flowing life is that a heaven exists and is a blessed existence where it is possible for every human being to enjoy life unending in the presence of God. However, our faith also warns that there is a hell and that it is possible that we may spend our eternity there. Just as the happiness of heaven is caused by an eternal union with God, the suffering of hell is caused by a decision to separate from that God forever.

In the fifth century, Augustine again and again warned his listeners about a terrible “Second Death” which awaited those who had turned their back upon God. He cautioned them:

> Death should be dreaded but it is after all only a passing event. Would that this first death separating soul from body were the only death. A worse death is that Second Death where the soul is not separated FROM the body, but where the soul is tormented IN the body. Fear this death more because nothing is worse than a death that never dies. (Sermon 335B, 5)

Though no one knows for sure that any human being is in hell, it remains a terrible possibility for every one of us. One of the disturbing results of the creation of immortal beings with free will is that it made “hell” a sad necessity. Once granted that human beings have free choice and that in a world created by a just God “justice must be served,” the need for a hell follows. It is evident from experience that human beings do not always act “justly”; they do not always act in accordance with their nature. They disrupt the order of the universe by pretending to be God, by not treating fellow humans as equals, by acting as though they were animals bound by no law except the law of self-fulfillment.

The glory of freedom is that most of us are able to freely and irrevocably choose God; the tragedy of freedom is that we can just as irrevocably choose to reject God, to turn
our back on God and walk away. And this is what hell is: to firmly and forever turn our back upon God.

Our Christian faith assures us that there is a “somewhere” beyond the doors of this Hospice where we live just now, indeed that there are two “somewhere’s.” The good news is that one of these is heavenly. The bad news is that the other is hellish. The VERY good news is that where we finally end up is within our control. There may be a sad necessity for hell, but there is no necessity for us to end up there. Our salvation is in our (and God’s) hands, and working together, we can accomplish it.

THE POSSIBILITY OF MY SALVATION

But will salvation happen to me? As I stand looking out through the window of this hospice at the eternity beyond, I ask myself: What is the probability that at the end of my life I will make the right choice? What must I DO to be saved?

The answer to this last question is more easily expressed as a negative: To be saved, all I must do is NOT CHOOSE to turn my back on God.

It seems reasonable to say this because Christ died for all human beings. He wished to give salvation to everyone, and therefore, any human being can be saved who does not choose to reject it. No one will be denied salvation except those who knowingly and freely choose to reject God.

In a sermon to the people of Hippo, Augustine once wisely observed that

Anyone who lives well is not able to die badly. (Sermon 249, 2

Christ outlined what “living well” means when he told his listeners that they must love God above all and love their neighbor as themselves (Matthew, 23: 37-40).

To love God above all means to respect and honor every place of God in the universe. It means to respect and love nature because this is a creation of God and God continues to support it by his presence, guiding the rise and fall of its various seasons. It means honoring and respecting ourselves because we, in an even more noble sense, are places of God in the world, living “temples of the Holy Spirit” making our way through time.

We must love ourselves by taking care of ourselves, not abusing ourselves, not destroying ourselves by a life-style hostile to health. Our person (body and soul) is a sacred place, not a toy to be used for our pleasure. Finally, we must love and respect every other member of the human race. They, like ourselves, are special places of God in this universe, and in reaching out in love to them, we are reaching out to God.

Finally, we must reach out in desire directly to God Himself, that Divine OTHER who is beyond and above us. Those of us with faith have learned something about what this
God is like, not only as he appears in the beauty of nature, or the wonder of ourselves, or the loveliness of our human loves, but even as he is in himself, an infinite being who in some strange way seems to love us. But even those without faith, without belief in anything beyond this life, must at least reach out to a "something" beyond and above themselves ... an ideal, a cause, a dream, anything that draws them beyond a purely earthy existence. In “turning their eyes” to the heavens beyond their pedestrian day-by-day existence, in focusing on something beyond themselves, they are beginning to reach out to a God still hidden.

These directions on how to be saved are helpful, but they don’t answer the nagging question: “How sure can I be that I will have the strength to fulfill the two great commandments of love well enough to get into heaven even though in a slightly ‘scarred’ and perhaps ‘singed’ condition? It is true that through the grace of God I have some vague idea of what I must do to be saved, but what assurance can I have that someday I will not try to hide the truth from myself? What assurance do I have that for the rest of my life I will actually go ahead and DO what needs to be done to be saved?"

The sad fact is that just now I can’t be sure. I have been redeemed but I do not yet know whether I am in a “saved” condition or will be so tomorrow.

To merit hell, one must choose to reject God forever. Is it likely that I will make that choice? The parable of the laborers in the garden gives the consoling message that even if I make a decision for God late in life, come to work in his garden at the last hour, then my essential reward (heaven) will be the same as that given to those who spent a lifetime working for the Lord (Matt 20, 1-16). But implied in the story is the frightening message that if I walk away after a lifetime working in the garden, my punishment (hell) will be the same as those who walked away in the first hour.

But is any human being capable of making such a momentous decision freely and knowingly? What about those who never experienced love in this life, those who were cruelly abused or discarded? What about those who never knew of Christ, indeed never knew of a personal God who cared about them?

Can someone turn their back on the Eternal Light when they have lived their whole life in darkness? Can a blind man be condemned for not embracing a light they have never known? A sad reality of this life is that some humans seem never to have experienced the light that comes from loving and being loved. Can they be condemned when, at the end of life, they see no God to embrace? Are there reasons for hope that such as these will be saved? Are there reasons for hope that WE will be saved, we who have been gifted with faith and love but have often wasted those gifts?

Augustine suggests that there are good reasons for hope for all of us. First of all, our God is a God of power and mercy. We may sometimes fear his power, but it is precisely that power that he uses mercifully to prevent us from being tempted overly much or, if we fall to temptation, to encourage us to repent and try again.

Most importantly, our hope is firmly based on the life and death of Jesus Christ. As Augustine told his people:
Christ has become our hope by being tempted, by suffering, by rising again. That is how he has become our hope; for what do we say to ourselves when we read about these happenings? We say:

God surely won’t damn us in the end, since it was for us that he sent his Son to be tempted, to be crucified, to die, and to rise again. God cannot despise us, if he did not spare even his own Son, but delivered him up for the sake of us all (cf. Romans 8:32).

That is how he has become our hope. He made himself a pattern for the life we live now by his labors, his temptations, his sufferings, and his death; and in his resurrection he is the pattern for the life we will live later. Without him, all that we would have known of human life is that we are born and we die; we would not have known that anyone could rise from the dead and live forever. But he took upon himself the human lot you know, and gave you proof of what you did not know. This is why he has become our hope in distress and in temptation. (Commentary on Psalm 60, 4)

Finally, the really good news is that we need not be perfect to get into heaven. We just need to be repentant. Towards the end of his life, Augustine got into an argument with a group who insisted that even the least sin could condemn a person to hell. He angrily replied that if that were true, NO ONE would make it! He then went on to give a description of the ordinary people who someday were likely to be saved:

They are those who, with faith in Christ, are moved by his love to perform whatever good works they do. Some are ordinary married persons who have intercourse with their spouse (but never with anyone else) sometimes for the sake of having a child and sometimes just for the pleasure of it. They are people who will often get angry and desire revenge when they are injured, but who are ready to forgive when asked. They are people who are very attached to their property but who will freely give at least a modest amount to the poor. They will not steal from you but are quick to take you to court if you try to steal from them. They are realistic enough to know that God should get the main credit for the good that they do. They are humble enough to admit that they are the source of their own evil acts. In this life God loves them for their good acts and gives forgiveness for their evil, and in the next life they will join the ranks of those who will reign with Christ forever. (Against Two Letters of the Pelagians, 3,5,14)

In this encouraging description of slightly scarred saints, Augustine is repeating the message of the Book of Revelations (7,14) that those who will eventually be saved and march into heaven will be those who have survived the great period of trial, those who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

I do believe that if the observer had further asked God why these people limping into heaven had merited salvation, he would have heard the response: They were not perfect, nor did they clearly see what they should do, but at least they tried their best.
With God’s help, I hope to be among that happy band, moving from this land of grace-assisted living to God’s land of unmerited loving. And there is good reason for my hope. It is found in the truth expressed by Augustine long ago:

We are on our way to see the Christ who is God and the Christ who shares our humanity is the way through which we are going. We are going to him and we are going through him. Why then should any of us fear becoming lost? (Sermon 123, 1.3)

A PRACTICAL OBSERVATION FOR OUR TROUBLESOME TIMES

One may ask what importance does all this have for our present times of war and distrust and disension? Augustine recognized that such times are always part of human history. Human beings may be part of a single community, but it is a community of cracked individuals who want perfect satisfaction of all their wants, and there is nothing in this life that can do that. As a result:

The City of Man remains in a chronic condition of civil war where there is always the oppression of those who fail by those who succeed. (City of God, 18.2)

And again:

Neither lions nor dragons have fought such bitter wars as human beings ... Nothing is so conflicted because of sin and yet so sociable in nature as the human race. (City of God, 12.23)

In such troublesome times, words about immortality, resurrection, heaven and personal salvation can be comforting. Desire for the eternal heaven that is within our grasp and fear of NOT getting there can override any fear of what may or may not happen to us in this life. As Augustine put it:

If a human being is afraid of losing God, no other human can frighten them. Fear what is above all humans and then no human will terrify you. Love what God promises and fear what God threatens and then you will neither be bribed by human promises nor frightened by human menaces. (Commentary on Psalm 63, 1)

We may have little control over what nature or other people do to us. We do have absolute control over what we do to ourselves. Put simply, world peace may not be in our power to achieve, but our eternal peace remains forever in our hands.
EPILOGUE

Augustine's reading of Sacred Scripture led him to conclude that some humans are not saved, indeed, that many are not saved. Over and over again he emphasized the need for the Sacrament of Baptism for salvation, but in various places in his works he suggested ways through which the unbaptized person might be saved. Thus, he says that Dismas the good thief and others as well received the Holy Spirit in a way other than through baptism. Saintly humans were able to possess the Spirit even before the coming of Christ (cf. On 83 Diverse Questions, 62; Retractions, 1.26; On the Happy Life, 3.9.12)

The heroes of the Old Testament (e.g., the prophets) were gifted with a faith in a Christ who was yet to come. (cf. City of God, 18.47; Commentary on the Gospel of John, 109.28) Salvation was given to some Jews of antiquity and other non-Jews who were "partakers of his worship" (cf. Letter 102, 12; On the Predestination of the Saints, c. 17.34). Even towards the end of his life, he suggests that although hearing the preaching of the gospel is indeed the ordinary way of coming to faith, this does not preclude the possibility that a few may receive the doctrine of salvation through God Himself or through angels from heaven (cf. On the Gift of Perseverance, 19.48).

Happily, Augustine’s gloomy conclusion about the numbers in hell has not found a place in the official teaching of the Catholic Church. It is certain that an eternal hell exists and that it is possible for any of us to end up there. But no one knows if any human has ever had the depths of malice that would warrant such a terrible condemnation. This position is reflected in the official Catechism of the Catholic Church. After stating that “believing Jesus Christ and in the One who sent him for our salvation is necessary for obtaining that salvation” (# 161), it adds later on that

Those who through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience ... those too may achieve eternal salvation. (# 847)

This statement does not address the salvation of those who are unable because of age or disability to make conscious decisions for or against God. At least the suggestion of God’s saving will for such poor souls is implied in the statement regarding infants dying without baptism:

As regards children who have died without baptism, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God. Indeed, the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved and Jesus’s tenderness toward children which caused him to say: “let the children come to me, do not hinder them” (Mark 10:14; I Timothy 2:4) allows us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism. (# 1261)
What these texts seem to conclude is that:

1. Those believing and baptized in Jesus Christ who do not turn their back on God at the end of their lives will be saved.

2. Those who without their fault do not possess that faith but who try to follow the will of God as this is revealed through their conscience will also be saved.

3. God’s mercy allows us to hope that those who are innocent, who are unable to make a decision for or against God, will also be taken care of by the good God.

The ambivalence of these last statements is simply a humble admission that how God works with the “good living pagan” or those innocents incapable of personal sin remains a mystery.

John Sachs gives the following summary of the current views of Catholic theologians writing about heaven and hell:

1. Because human beings are free, they are able to reject God. Therefore, hell is a real possibility.

2. Though final damnation remains a possibility with which every individual must reckon, neither Scripture nor Church teaching claims that anyone in fact has been or will be finally lost.

3. Certain knowledge about the final outcome of judgment for individuals is impossible, but because of Christ’s victory over sin and death, we may and must hope that all men and women will in fact be saved. (John R. Sachs, S. J., “Current Eschatology: Universal Salvation and the Problem of Hell,” *Theological Studies*, June 1991, vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 233-241)