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THE SOURCES OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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The Sermon on the Mount and Christian Ethics

I. THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT—VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

The Sermon on the Mount is a Gospel text of prime importance for Christian ethics. This seems to have been St. Matthew’s intention in writing his Gospel. In this first of the five great discourses that form the body of his work, the Evangelist clearly wished to gather together the teachings on the sort of justice that Jesus proposed to his listeners, “higher than that of the Pharisees.” These were to distinguish the conduct and moral standards of his followers. In this section we have a summary of Gospel morality as it came from the lips of the Lord himself. It is one of the chief documents used in primitive Christian catechism and stands out as a principal source for Christian moral teaching, in both homiletics and theological reflection.

There is ample opportunity to find in the Sermon on the Mount an answer to our question on the specificity of Christian ethics. Jesus contrasts the principles of the Mosaic Law with the justice he preaches, and he asserts his authority: “But I tell you. . .” He declares that his followers cannot be content to act as the pagans do. The concrete terms of Christ’s preaching undeniably address the question of the specific nature of Christian ethics, as it differs from the morality of the Jews and pagans.

The Fathers of the Church and the great scholastics understood well the importance of the Sermon on the Mount. St. Augustine in particu-

lar—and we shall return to him later—saw in it the perfect model for the Christian life. In the thirteenth century, Franciscan theologians as well as St. Thomas were to see in the Sermon on the Mount the distinctive text of the New Law, as contrasted with the Decalogue and the Old Law. For them, as for the Greek Fathers, the Sermon was one of the most characteristic texts of Christian moral doctrine.

I should add that the Sermon on the Mount has been one of the chief sources of spiritual renewal known to the Church through the ages. Its fruitfulness is amply attested by its constant reappearance. There are few passages in Scripture that touch the Christian heart more surely and deeply, or that have a greater appeal for nonbelievers. The Sermon on the Mount was one of Ghandi’s favorite texts; he reproached Christians for their neglect of it. Bergson saw in it the very expression of “open morality.”

The Modern Problem with the Sermon on the Mount

In our times, however, the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount has caused considerable concern to theologians as well as exegtes. It is not only the classic problems raised by this or that verse that trouble them—problems that are often due to Jesus’ language of imagery, which does not lend itself easily to translation. Rather, there is a major difficulty that plagues interpreters, dividing them into opposite camps and occasioning many attempts at explanations. It even leads some to back off cautiously from the Sermon.

The difficulty is this. The moral teaching contained in the Sermon on the Mount appears to be so sublime and so demanding that no one can follow it in concrete reality, at least not the majority of people. Isn’t it challenging us to impossible heights? This is a serious objection to a moral teaching that purports to be addressed to everyone. If it is impracticable, it falls short of its goal, which is to shape human action, and so it becomes useless. In the face of the Sermon, a person might say: “Isn’t it enough to refrain from murder and injustice to my neighbor, to avoid adultery and keep my promises? Is anger a sin, that I should be called into court over it? Can I be forbidden to have impure thoughts? And how can it be decreed as a law of our society that we should not resist evil, that we should turn the other cheek?” In a word, does not the Sermon on the Mount preach impossible behavior, impossible, that is, for the generality of people?
The problem is seen at its most serious when morality is defined as the sum of obligations imposed on us by the will of God. If the Sermon on the Mount is this kind of law, if each of its prescriptions—and they are stringent—expresses a binding command, as modern ethicists understand it, we can certainly ask if it is not laying on the shoulders of the disciples an intolerable legal burden, a yoke harsher even than that of the Old Law.

The problem has evoked many answers. Warren S. Kissinger counts thirty-four in his history of interpretations of the Sermon. For the purposes of our research, we shall consider those that have a theological bearing upon the question.

1. The “Catholic” Interpretation

First let us look at what is still called the “Catholic” position, the one of immediate interest to us. It rests on a distinction between a moral code designed for all Christians, expressed primarily in the Decalogue, and a more spiritual and exacting doctrine reserved for an elite group such as religious, who have freely chosen to strive for evangelical perfection. The Sermon on the Mount therefore is not the concern of all Christians and does not oblige them. It falls under the classification of counsels, not commands. This distinction bypasses an exegetical problem: for whom was the Sermon intended? Christ was speaking not to the crowd, but to a group of disciples and apostles whom he called to himself.

This interpretation, which has become classic within recent centuries, has an initial flaw. In restricting the Sermon on the Mount to a select group, it opposes patristic tradition, to say nothing of the Evangelist’s intention. St. John Chrysostom, in explaining the Sermon to his people, foresaw this danger and took care to explain: “Because it is said that Jesus Christ was teaching his apostles, we do not have to think he was speaking only to them. In teaching them, he was teaching all of us” (Homily XV on St. Matthew, N. 1). St. Augustine chose the Sermon on the Mount as the subject of his first homily to the people of Hippo because “this Sermon contains all the precepts needed for our guidance in the Christian life.” In the view of the Fathers, the Sermon was intended for all people, even though the apostles were called to play the role of intermediaries.

The second drawback to this interpretation is that it has led to the omission of the Sermon on the Mount in moral teaching, at all levels. Moral theology is based chiefly, according to the manuals, on the ten commandments; the Sermon is viewed as a bit of spirituality. This explains its relative neglect by Catholic authors: the Sermon is not essential to ethics, nor, strictly speaking, to salvation. Its message, however beautiful, is optional.

Finally, it does not seem that the distinction between a form of morality destined for all and a morality reserved to a religious elite responds adequately to the difficulty experienced in living out the Sermon. Can we be sure that the observances proper to the religious life—including the support of a community that seeks to live the Gospel—are sufficient to enable religious to put the Sermon on the Mount into practice any better than simple Christian folk? Can these observances give them the ability to do the “impossible”? Experience of religious life gives this the lie and shows rather the need for other intervening factors such as faith and grace, which, far from separating religious from other Christians, unite them profoundly.

2. An Idealistic Moral Theory

The teaching in the Sermon on the Mount has also been viewed as the expression of an ideal—unworkable no doubt, but still useful on the practical level, since we need to ask a great deal of people in order to obtain even a little effort and progress. The impossible is proposed so as to goad each into doing as much as he can.

We can hardly accept an explanation that places the Sermon on the Mount in the category of an imaginary ideal rather than a concrete reality where the action is. The perception of ourselves as unable to follow a moral teaching makes the teaching quite ineffective. We will soon abandon an ideal too far beyond us.

We can include here the interpretation of liberal theologians inspired by Kant and nineteenth-century idealism. In contrast to Judaism’s obsession with works, the Sermon presents us, they would say, with a new morality of sentiment, where benevolence and one’s personal intentions are central. This morality is altogether interior, in contrast to the external morality of law.

Beyond all doubt, the Sermon on the Mount brings a deepening of interiority on the level of the “heart,” but Protestant exegetes themselves are becoming more and more convinced today of the need for the effective action demanded by the Sermon. The exterior dimension, in the sense of concrete action in our neighbor’s behalf, is as essential to the

Sermon on the Mount as the interior dimension, in the sense of the "heart" and the "hidden place" where only the Father sees us. The teaching of the Sermon cannot be turned into a morality of sentiment or intention, any more than it can be considered as a purely formal morality consisting exclusively of universal principles, separated from experience and practice. The problem of realization, or of the "impossible," remains unsolved.

3. An Interim Morality

Early in this century, Albert Schweitzer, among others, proposed a new interpretation of the Sermon along eschatological lines, basing it on the belief of Jesus and the first disciples that the end of the world was near. The Sermon on the Mount proclaimed a very demanding doctrine approaching heroism, but it was valid only for the short space of time before the imminent return of Christ. It was an interim legislation, in preparation for a unique upcoming event. It could not be applied to a lengthy period of time or to life in the normal times that Christians knew as the Parousia delayed its coming.

Once again the Sermon was being excluded from Christian ethics. Its teaching was meant only for a heroic era; it could not serve as the basis of moral theory for ordinary Christian life. It remained a morality of "the impossible."

It is true that we need to take the historical context into account when interpreting the Sermon. The expectation of the end time, the urging of the Spirit, and the threat of persecution certainly contributed a special vitality and forcefulness to the Gospel precepts. Yet nowhere in the Sermon itself do we find any textual reference to a time limit for the fulfillment of its injunctions. The preaching of love for neighbor and even for enemies, for example, sets no limit as to time or persons; its thrust seems quite the opposite. So our problem is still with us.

4. The Sermon, A Social Program

It seems appropriate to mention Tolstoy's interpretation of the Sermon here, even though it is not directly theological. According to him, the Sermon was a blueprint for a new society ruled by love and enjoying peace; it would be the Kingdom of Christ on earth. The Sermon was to be accepted and carried out literally, notably the phrase "Offer the wicked man no resistance." Tolstoy saw as the logical result of the Sermon the abolition of armies, courtrooms, and oaths. His interpretation was directly social and political; he missed its distinctly spiritual level. For him the Kingdom of Heaven would come in this world if we followed the Sermon. We simply wonder if Tolstoy's nonviolent interpretation perhaps prepared the way for the violent methods of communism, by helping to weaken the resistance of the Russian people.

5. The Lutheran Interpretation

Luther read the Sermon on the Mount in light of the Letter to the Romans and its critique of the Law. He recognized that the Sermon confronts us with the impossible, but this was in order to make us aware of our sins and lead us through this revelation to repentance and faith. According to Luther, Christ alone fulfilled the precepts of the Sermon, as a substitute for us all. He alone possessed the necessary justice, and could clothe us with it through faith. But this justice remained extrinsic to us, and there could be no question of requiring Christians to do the works indicated in the Sermon. This would be to fall back into the error of seeking justification through works. Luther also rejected the "third use of the law," which sees in the Law an indication of God's will for those who have faith and want to conform their lives to it.

Luther's interpretation of the Sermon was merely an application of his teaching on justification and the Law. The Sermon was treated as the Old Law. It played the same role of prosecutor, with still stronger demands. This stress on justification by faith without works produced a break, an opposition in fact, between the Letter to the Romans and the Sermon and between St. Paul and St. Matthew, in the heart of the entire Protestant tradition. The Sermon was viewed as a law that promised justice in return for works. No matter how excellent, such a text would be considered inferior to the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith and would be interpreted in its light. Even if it were not suspect, it would remain subordinate.

To our surprise, we thus find Protestant thought in agreement with post-Tridentine Catholic tradition, at least on this point: the relegation of the Sermon on the Mount to a marginal position with respect to the central teachings. The Decalogue now claimed first place in Catholic moral teaching and in Protestant morality, particularly that inspired by Calvinism. On both sides we note a separation, too, between faith and morality as the measure of conduct.
The Question of the Relation between the Sermon on the Mount and Christian Ethics

Our study of various interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount raises a fundamental problem. How is it that this text, attributed to the Lord himself and for long the privileged source for Christian moral teaching, has been brusquely set aside and largely ignored by ethicists, both Catholic and Protestant? Furthermore, the difficulty in interpretation persists in spite of all the explanations proposed: Does not the Sermon challenge us to the impossible? Is it not impracticable? How then can it to be included in a moral system?

To help us clarify these problems, I believe it would be useful to consult one of the great architects of Christian ethics, St. Augustine, and particularly his commentary on the Sermon of the Lord, as he loves to call it.

St. Augustine is one of the principal witnesses to the patristic tradition and is in the best position to teach us how the Sermon was interpreted in the early Church. He can show us how to read the Sermon and will throw light on our problems. St. Augustine has the advantage of having been at the same time a theologian and an exegete, like the Church Fathers, a preacher and a man of experience. His exegesis was wholly the fruit of study, prayer and life, both his own and that of his people.

St. Augustine’s commentary on the Sermon of the Lord has a particular interest for us. In my opinion it has unfortunately been eclipsed, doubtless because it was considered a minor work in comparison to the masterpieces that followed it. When we study it at close hand, however, we see that it contains a preliminary sketch for a presentation of Christian ethics in immediate contact with the Gospel, and some fruitful intuitions, which were to create a rich tradition. Almost all the medieval commentaries on the Sermon go back to Augustine’s. St. Thomas, when he was about to compose his Summa theologiae, re-read the commentary of Augustine and drew from it (more successfully than his predecessors) the main ideas he would integrate into his own moral structure. Rarely has any preaching had such resonance or brought such influence to bear on theology.

The commentary on the Sermon on the Mount was St. Augustine’s first pastoral work. Scarcely had he been ordained a priest, at the beginning of the year 391, when his bishop, Valerius, put him in charge of preaching in Hippo. Augustine was thus the first African priest to assume this function, and his example served to spread the Western custom of having priests preach.

In order to prepare himself, Augustine asked his bishop for a few months of freedom. He spent this time in prayerful, reflective study of the Bible. He also set himself to commit the Scripture to memory, as he had learned to do in the schools of rhetoric. It was a living process, designed for meditation and the communication of the faith, and in harmony with the style of the Gospel itself, composed as it is of brief sayings easily memorized. Thus Augustine’s preaching, particularly in his first work, would be sown with biblical quotations.

We are dealing therefore with a “novice” at preaching. Augustine wrote out his first homilies and learned them by heart, then revised the text for publication. His commentary thus combined two genres, being written in book form and also delivered as a homily. It does not have the spontaneity of the later homilies on the Psalms and on John. Since it was not a spontaneous work, we find in it the repetitions of the preacher and digressions designed to satisfy the topical interests of his hearers.

I should add at once, however, that these homilies are the work of a first-class rhetorician and one of the geniuses of Christian thought, who reached full maturity before the age of forty. The commentary contains some very rich ideas, which created a tradition and exerted an influence for centuries.

Augustine’s commentary on the Sermon on the Mount possesses, in fact, more than one dimension. It is obviously pastoral in aim, which places it in the ambience of the Lord’s Sermon, addressed by Jesus to the people. It is also personal, for Augustine applied the teaching of the Sermon to himself and tried to live by it. It is his own experience that he communicates in his preaching. As A. G. Hamman writes, “In fia-gree, the personal experience of Augustine is revealed; he is shaken by the overwhelming discourse, the charter he has made his own. The conversion he preaches is the story of his own life; the hunger for happiness that devoured him has been appeased with the Beatitudes, beyond the
measure of his quest, beyond his thirst.” The Confessions, which recount this experience for us, were written some years later.

Because of Augustine’s genius, the commentary on the Sermon also possessed a specifically theological dimension. Its structure was formed by several major concepts, which marked a preliminary organization of evangelical moral teaching and would pass into theological tradition.

Obviously, the commentary had its exegetical dimension. It was one of the earliest examples of Augustinian exegesis; the method would be described in his De doctrina christiana several years later. Here Augustine’s first principle of theological thought was clearly explained: Scripture was the wellspring, the direct source of Christian teaching, preaching, catechesis, and theology as well, a hearth of light and life for all Christians. From these perspectives, the Sermon on the Mount held a privileged place for Augustine.

We shall consider here the five major theological intuitions that inspired St. Augustine’s commentary on the Sermon. They will provide the principal features of the model we are trying to discover: a Christian ethics based on the Sermon on the Mount.

1. The Sermon on the Mount, A Charter for Christian Living

St. Augustine’s first intuition was that the Sermon on the Mount is the perfect model of Christian life, a summary of the Lord’s teachings on fitting conduct for his disciples. This perception determined his choice of the Sermon as the subject of his first preaching.

His choice was an original one; St. Augustine was the only Church Father to make his own commentary on the Sermon, apart from general commentaries on St. Matthew. Augustine realized he was departing from the common way. He felt the need to excuse his audacity on the grounds of the Lord’s authority: “This affirmation [that the Sermon is the perfect model for Christian living] is not really rash; it is based on the Lord’s own words.”

His choice was guided, clearly, by pastoral considerations. Augustine wanted to speak with the people of Hippo about what would be of the greatest interest and value to them. The Gospel teaching on right conduct brought them Christ’s answer to their deepest questions about happiness, a way of life, virtues, and precepts that would lead them to God and help them to solve their daily problems. It was a moral catechesis he planned for his hearers, in perfect harmony with the Evangelist’s own purposes.

But Augustine’s viewpoint was also theological. He saw in the Sermon a complete, perfect teaching on Christian morality. In his introductory paragraph he returned to this idea of perfection three times: “I think that whoever meditates in earnest love upon the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount, found in St. Matthew’s Gospel, will find there a perfect model for Christian living [perfectum vitae Christianae modum], in respect to the most fitting way to act.” He then added: “At the close of the Sermon we see that it has brought together all the precepts we need for our guidance in life [quae ad informandum vitam pertinent].” And in his conclusion he affirmed: “I have made these observations to show that this Sermon is perfect, since it gives us all the precepts needed for Christian living [quibus Christiana vita informat].”

The moral perfection of the Sermon was the unifying theme of his discourse, found first of all in its content: it assembled all the necessary precepts with a kind of amplitude. We need to note here that the term precept was used in a broad sense, for it designated not only the Beatitudes but also the precepts of the new justice that followed them, such as the prescriptions on fasting, prayer, and forgiveness.

Augustine found further perfection in the sevenfold form the Sermon takes. For him, as for patristic tradition, the number seven was a symbol of perfection and plentitude. This was not Augustine’s invention. He drew it from Scripture, from Psalm 11, as he remarked at the end of his commentary: “The words of the Lord are chaste words, silver mined from the earth, purified by fire, seven times refined. This number has inspired me to relate these precepts [the entire Sermon on the Mount] to the seven Beatitudes, which the Lord places at the beginning of the Sermon, and also to the seven works of the Holy Spirit mentioned by the prophet Isaiah.” The idea was not new to St. Augustine, for in his commentary on Psalm 11 he had said, “There are seven degrees of blessedness noted by the Lord in his Sermon on the Mount as reported in St. Matthew: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, etc. . . . blessed are the peacemakers.’ You can see that the whole Sermon flows from these seven sayings. Because the eighth one, where it says, ‘Blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice’s sake,’ refers to the fire in which the silver is seven times refined.”

Augustine’s appeal to the symbolism of the number seven was not as artificial from the exegetical point of view as we might be tempted to think. In connection with the seven petitions of the Our Father, the Jerusalem Bible notes: “The Lord’s Prayer in its Matthaean form has seven petitions. The number is a favorite of Matthew’s: 2 x 7 generations in the Genealogy (1:17); 7 beatitudes (5:4ff); 7 parables (13:3ff); forgiveness not 7 but 77 times (18:22); 7 woes for the Pharisees (23:13ff);
7 sections into which the Gospel is divided. Matthew may have added to the basic text (Lk 11:2–4) the third and seventh petitions in order to get the number 7” (Mt 6:9, note b).

Augustine’s intuition was clear and firm: the Sermon on the Mount was the perfect rule of life for Christians. It could be called the charter of the Christian life. To gauge the value of this intuition we need to see that Augustine did not isolate the Sermon from the rest of Scripture but saw it as a summit upon which all revealed moral teachings converged. The Sermon was said to be the perfection of this teaching, in the sense that it contained and fulfilled all its precepts. We can say of it what Augustine was to say of the Lord’s Prayer in his letter to Proba, where he remarked that every Christian prayer should flow from and harmonize with it.

Augustine had a very strong sense of this living concentration of Scripture within certain texts of the New Testament, texts that emphasized Scripture’s immediate orientation to Christ, to his Word, his actions, his person. Augustine’s art consisted in showing us Scripture as it stood out in bold relief against its background. Thus we see the Sermon on the Mount as the culminating point of evangelical moral teaching.

Here we are sounding the depths of Augustine’s thought. The Sermon on the Mount had such import and resonance for him because it was the Word of the Lord, as Our Father was the prayer of the Lord. Augustine took up the theme of the Evangelist when he reported that Jesus spoke with an authority that struck the crowds, and gave us the characteristic expression, “You have heard . . . but I say to you.” The Sermon was the word of Christ who elicits our faith and enlightens it. Augustine’s teaching was also an expression of his own faith seeking to understand and communicate the word of Jesus as one plays a searchlight over a darkened terrain. His preaching was but a prolongation of the Lord’s. The Sermon on the Mount thus became the basis for preaching and the wellspring of Christian ethics. We are at the source of Augustinian evangelism, which was to continue through the Middle Ages.

I should like to mention briefly its historical prolongation in theology. St. Thomas grasped the significance of Augustine’s intuition more clearly than all the theologians who preceded him. He referred to it explicitly when he declared that the Sermon on the Mount was definitively the representative text of the New Law (laIae, 108 a 3).2

2. He was preceded in this by the summa of Alexander of Hales, but he reestablished in a new way the connection with St. Augustine’s commentary.

Studying the content of the New Law, he started with a summary of a quotation from the beginning of Augustine’s commentary on the Sermon: “We should notice that when [the Lord] said ‘He that hears these my words,’ his words signify that the Lord’s discourse is perfect because it contains all the precepts that make up the Christian life.” In his response he continued, “As Augustine shows, the Sermon which the Lord gave on the Mount contained everything pertaining to the Christian life [totam informationem vitae christianae continet]. It sets in order perfectly all the interior movements of the human person.” We recognize in these terms the guiding thought of Augustine, notably in the word informationem, which designates formation or the orientation of life and activity to perfection.

Regarding this Father Guindon wrote: “It was not enough for St. Thomas to quote this rich Augustinian intuition. He made it his own, and in assimilating it gave it an even lofter interpretation than St. Augustine. . . .” I would simply say that in this concept of the Sermon as the perfect charter for the Christian life, St. Thomas met St. Augustine on a personal level as a disciple, at once faithful and creative.

2. The Beatitudes, Seven Stages in the Christian Life

Augustine’s second intuition was his interpretation of the Beatitudes as representing seven degrees or stages leading the Christian from humility or poverty in spirit to wisdom and the vision of God.

St. Ambrose had preceded him, between 388 and 392, in expressing this view in his commentary on St. Luke (PL 15, 5.1734–39). He there interpreted the eight beatitudes of St. Matthew as the progressive ascent of the Christian from detachment from the goods of this world to the crown of martyrdom, with each stage or virtue leading to the next. At the same time St. Ambrose connected the four beatitudes in St. Luke with the four classic virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude.

St. Augustine took up St. Ambrose’s idea but developed it in his own personal way.3 He first considered the beatitudes as a group of seven;
in his mind the eighth was a summation of all the others and fulfilled them by returning to the initial promise of the Kingdom. This clearly fits in with his penchant for the number seven. In Augustine’s view it was in no way a lessening, but rather an indication of plenitude, since these seven beatitudes affected the entire life of a Christian, from conversion to the vision of God, where they reached their fulfillment. They had their place throughout the whole life of the Christian.

In his interpretation of each beatitude and their mutual relations, St. Augustine was equally original, for here he made use of his wealth of personal experience, described in the Confessions a few years later. The connection between the explanation of the Beatitudes and Augustine’s first masterpiece is so close that we could almost propose a division within the Confessions, beginning with the journey of the soul described in the commentary on the Beatitudes. The discussion of certain beatitudes clearly evokes Augustine’s experience—for example, the relation he notes between the beatitude of meekness and the reading of Scripture. For Augustine also, the Beatitudes describe his own journey following his conversion. The road was leading him toward the wisdom of God, for which he longed with all his heart and which he discussed in the closing books of the Confessions.

Yet we need not think that Augustine’s personal experience slanted his reading of the Beatitudes. Actually it was reciprocal: for Augustine the Beatitudes came first; they were the words of Christ that lit up his whole life and named his experience; they taught him how to read and understand his own story. The Gospel words direct practical life, and putting them into practice deepens our understanding of them. This give and take characterized Augustine’s interpretation of the Sermon and made it also an interpretation of experience. The practical aspect was essential, as Augustine himself reminds us at the end of his commentary: “Whether a person accepts this division [of the Sermon according to the seven beatitudes, as I have suggested] or some other, the important thing is to act upon what we have heard from the Lord, if we would build upon rock.”

Because it found resonance in the words of the Beatitudes, St. Augustine’s experience transcended the unique, personal sphere of his individual circumstances. It possessed a broad, general value, a significance for all believers whom he addressed, and it thus shared in the spiritual universality of the Sermon on the Mount.

nated here: conversion first, found in the first three beatitudes, then the search for wisdom, from the fourth to the seventh.

This recalls the division of the first two parts of the Confessions: the confession of faults, of what Augustine has been (Books I–IX); and then the confession of what he is at present, of his search for wisdom (Book X). Another underlying theme is the division between the active life, dealt with in the first five beatitudes, and the contemplative life, in the last two.5

This is a model for the spiritual journey. Its stages are not isolated, but bring out in ordered progression the principle elements of a Christian’s personal life. Whether or not our hypothesis of a division of the Confessions according to the series of beatitudes is accurate, we can still find in it a preliminary sketch and general outline for the later work.

We should note, too, that the way of the Beatitudes is also a way of virtues. It introduces a series of virtues appropriate to this interpretation and different from the classical list of theological and moral virtues: humility, docility, repentance, hunger for justice, purity of heart, peace, and wisdom. This less systematic series harmonizes well with the description of Christian progress.

Carried on through History

We find the explanation of the Beatitudes as seven stages of the Christian life throughout the Middle Ages, up to the advent of scholasticism. In the ninth century there were, for example, Raban Maur and Paschase Radbert, in the eleventh St. Peter Damian, and in the twelfth St. Anselm, Hugh of St. Victor, and John of Salisbury, all of whom reveal their dependence upon St. Augustine. Scholasticism, which organized morality in the context of the theological and moral virtues, was to replace this genetic and psychological interpretation with a more speculative perception. St. Thomas saw in the Beatitudes the culmination of a succession of human responses to the question of happiness. Yet in his own way he took up Augustine’s concept by associating with each beatitude a virtue attained through the corresponding gift. For him, too, the Beatitudes applied to the entire Christian life.

3. Interpreting the Sermon in the Light of the Beatitudes

“The Lord described seven stages of happiness in his Sermon on the Mount recorded by St. Matthew. . . . The entire Sermon grows out of these” (Homily on Psalm 11). “The number seven has inspired me to relate all these precepts to the seven beatitudes with which the Lord began his Sermon” (conclusion of the commentary on the Sermon).

The third great intuition of St. Augustine was his interpretation and division of the entire Sermon, beginning with the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are not simply an introduction to the Sermon, as has sometimes been thought, but a sort of keystone which dominates and divides it.

Some interpreters hesitate to create this division in the Sermon as the commentary does. A. G. Hamman writes: “Some editors, such as A. Mutzenbecher, go so far as to discern in the two books that make up the Commentary a redistribution of the material to fit the eight (seven) beatitudes. This is pushing the author’s systematization a bit too far. From their viewpoint, the first book corresponds to the first five beatitudes and the active life; the second to the last two and the contemplative life, culminating in the vision of God. Accordingly, Augustine comes up with a numerical structure, to the delight of the Middle Ages.” Father Hamman is unduly sceptical here, for a simple reading of the commentary shows the division of the Sermon according to the Beatitudes; it is done in broad outline but is nonetheless quite apparent. Father Hamman himself gives the division in a note: Book I: first beatitude, 5.13–10.28; second beatitude, 11.29–32; third beatitude, 12.33–36; fourth beatitude, 13.37–18.54; fifth beatitude, 18.55–23.80; sixth beatitude, Book II, 1.1–22.76; seventh beatitude, 23.77–25.86.6 Actually the material division of the Sermon is less important than the precept. The Beatitudes pervade the whole Sermon as does the moral teaching it dispenses.

Augustine did not give us in his text the reason for this division. The number seven in Psalm 11 gave him the idea of relating all the precepts of the Sermon to the seven beatitudes. In reality, this ordering was determined by a basic idea: the Beatitudes give us Christ’s answer to the primary human question about happiness, which is at the origin of the search for wisdom. Also, Augustine saw the Beatitudes as the principal part of the Sermon, just as the question of happiness dominates philosophy and morality.

St. Augustine expressed this view on numerous occasions. I shall sim-

5. Cf. A. Mutzenbecher, ed. Brépols, Introduction, pp. xii–xiii, De consensus evangelistarum, 1.5.8: two virtues are proposed, one active and the other contemplative.

ply quote from De moribus Ecclesiae catholicae (387–88), where he explains the moral teaching of the Church against the Manicheans. "Let us inquire reasonably, then, how man ought to live. Indeed, we all want to be happy; there is not a person who would not agree with this even before the words are uttered" (3.4). In The City of God he wrote: “Since I must now discuss the appointed ends of the heavenly and earthly cities, I ought first to explain . . . the arguments men use to create happiness for themselves in the midst of the sorrows of this life, and the vast distance between their hollow pleasures and the hope held out to us by God, whose object is that blessed bliss he will one day grant us. This can be illustrated not only by revelation but also by the light of reason, for the sake of those who do not share our faith” (1.19.1).

In many of his works addressed in part to unbelievers, Augustine treated the question of happiness from the point of view of reason. He gave, in the De moribus for example, the Christian answer based on the charity that unites us to God and on the four classic virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. He showed how these acquire a higher excellence in Christians and become forms of charity.

In his preaching at Hippo, Augustine felt freer to speak as a Christian. Explaining the Gospel to the faithful, he could begin with the Beatitudes as the perfect answer to the question of happiness and make them the framework of his moral teaching. This perspective had, among other advantages, the possibility of throwing light on typically Christian virtues such as humility, penance, mercy, and purity of heart, which do not stand out so clearly in the classifications of virtues found in Greek philosophy.7

Such was the basic idea, still in the outline stage, that makes division of the Sermon effective and fruitful. The symbolic use of the number seven was merely a way of expressing it.

St. Thomas adopted this idea. He made it the principle of his interpretation of the Beatitudes, and especially of his plan of moral theology in the Summa. Here again St. Augustine and St. Thomas have profound rapport: the Beatitudes are Christ’s answer to the question of happiness and thus, together with the whole Sermon on the Mount, dominate Christian ethics. St. Thomas was undoubtedly the first scholastic theologian to have adopted this intuition of Augustine, giving it, in his treatise on the Beatitudes, the place of honor in Christian moral teaching.

4. The Beatitudes and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit

The most original note in St. Augustine’s commentary on the Sermon was the connection he made between the Beatitudes in St. Matthew and the gifts of the Holy Spirit in Isaiah 11 according to the Septuagint. This prophetic text had already been used frequently by the Greek Fathers, but they, in line with the same text, attributed the gifts to Christ, the shoot from Jesse’s stock. Augustine was the first to have linked the texts of Matthew and Isaiah, and consequently to have attributed the gifts of the Holy Spirit to the very Christians to whom the Beatitudes were addressed. That Augustine was fully aware he was being innovative is suggested by his discreet “It seems to me, therefore . . .” (4.11).

The connection between the Beatitudes and gifts might seem contrived if we read only St. Matthew’s text, for he makes no obvious reference to the passage from Isaiah, but rather to chapter 61, which speaks of the Spirit resting upon the Anointed One of Yahweh and sending him to “bring good news to the poor . . . to console the afflicted.” This fact does not detract from Augustine’s profoundly scriptural intuition, rich and fruitful.

What is the point of this connection, if not to show that the Christian cannot follow the way of the Beatitudes without the grace of the Holy Spirit accompanying each stage of the journey? Augustine’s idea, original in its form, was actually a development of the thought of St. Paul, frequently commented on by the Greek Fathers, that the Christian life is a life in the Holy Spirit.8 In his preparatory retreat Augustine had meditated much on St. Paul, whose words (Rm 15:13) had occasioned his conversion. His very numerous quotations of St. Paul show how he concentrated on the Apostle’s description of life in the Spirit, especially in Romans 8 and Galatians 5. Thus, in pondering the text of Isaiah, Augustine linked Paul with St. Matthew. According to him, the Beatitudes described the stages of the Christian life through which the Holy Spirit guides us progressively. Concerning the need for the Holy Spirit’s help, we should ponder the lengthy meditation in Book 13 of the Confessions on the verse in Genesis depicting the Holy Spirit as moving over the waters. It is through charity and through his gifts that the Holy Spirit

7. For St. Thomas, in Iliad for example, humility is related to modesty, a virtue falling under temperance (q 161); penance is not included among the virtues of Iliad, and is discussed with the sacrament of penance (IIIa q 85); mercy is an interior effect of charity (q 30).

8. St. Irenaeus had already, in the second century, represented the Holy Spirit as a ladder whereby we ascend to God: “Spiritus Sanctus, arreta incorruptelae et confirmatio fidei nostrae et scala ascensionis ad Deum” (Adc. Haereses, 3.24.1). The first rung was fear of the Lord according to Sir 1:16. In his De Sacramentis, St. Ambrose calls the Holy Spirit the guide to perfection (1.2.8).
leads us to rest and peace in God. Without him, charity cannot overcome the languor caused by earthly cares and the impurity of our thoughts.  

In every sense the overriding theme of Augustine was indeed Christian and notably Pauline: the Christian's life is a life according to the Beatitudes and the Holy Spirit. Augustine developed this theme by comparing the way of the Beatitudes and the way of the gifts in detail. He thus used his intuition in an interpretation at once exegetical, theological, artistic, and poetic. Augustine truly offered us "a new song," in the sense of Psalm 149, whose first verse he commented on so finely, showing how such a song is born of love and given by the Holy Spirit. It is small wonder if in this song of Beatitudes and gifts, St. Augustine's thought took liberties with staid reason or textual logic. If he was upheld by the Holy Spirit, who could prevent him from displaying the riches he had discovered in his meditation on the Scriptures?

We should note in passing how easily St. Augustine passed over the chasm later created by Protestant thought between the Sermon on the Mount and the Letter to the Romans. The relation between Beatitudes and gifts unites Matthew and Paul closely through Isaiah. We shall come upon the same seamless convergence in St. Thomas's teaching on the Gospel Law: he defined it by citing chapter 3 of Romans, which speaks of the law of faith, and chapter 8, which tells us of the law of the Spirit. Further on, he assigned the Sermon on the Mount as the proper test of this law (IaIIae, q 108, a 1 and 3). Far from seeing opposition between these great texts, these doctors experience the need to unite them, interpreting them by means of each other.

The Beatitudes and the Gifts

Let us look briefly at the relations of the Beatitudes to the gifts. Our understanding of them depends far more on experience and meditation than on textual study. The first thing St. Augustine saw was that in order to establish a correspondence he had to reverse the order of gifts, which begin in Isaiah with wisdom, the highest, and end with fear of the Lord, which corresponds to poverty and humility. He returned to this parallelism on two occasions: in De doctrina christiana 2.7.9—11, that is, in his first year as a bishop; then in sermon 347, undated. Each time there are variants, for Augustine's thought was too vital to be simply repetitive.

The gift of fear corresponds to poverty and humility because it makes the heart humble and contrite. It also alerts us to our human condition, so that we will accept the challenge of the cross.

Filial piety is associated with an attitude of docility to Scripture. It inspires us to follow God's will as revealed in his Word and in all the happenings of life, even when they go against the grain, as they so often do, since they fall under his Providence.

The blessedness of those who weep is paired with the gift of knowledge, which reminds us that we are sinners before God and shows us how we are to love God for his own sake and to love our neighbor in God. This knowledge inspires us to do penance but shields us, too, from despair.

The gift of fortitude sustains the efforts of those who hunger and thirst for justice. The world is crucified to them and they to the world. Their love leads them toward eternal goods, toward the Holy Trinity.

The association of the gift of counsel with the blessedness of the merciful is unexpected, but in the light of experience it is a happy choice. The best advice the Lord gives us is that if we want his help in our weakness we must be merciful ourselves and forgive others. This advice is based on the typically evangelical connection between love of God and love of neighbor, which we meet again in the petition for forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer.

The gift of understanding befits the pure of heart, for their clear gaze penetrates the mysterious wisdom of God, "the things that no eye has seen and no ear has heard" (1 Cor 2:9). In his De doctrina christiana, Augustine makes it clear that this perception remains imperfect, "as in a mirror," for we walk more by faith than by sight (2 Cor 5:6—7). This purification consists in preferring truth to one's self and to all attachment to neighbor.

The goal of this progressive pilgrimage is attained through the gift of wisdom which corresponds to the beatitude of peacemakers. Wisdom is appropriate for those who are interiorly at peace, as far as is possible in this life. Sermon 347 adds: "And what is this goal, if not Jesus Christ? What is the wisdom of God, if not Jesus Christ? Who is the Son of God, if not Jesus Christ? It is in him, therefore, that we attain wisdom and
become children of God when we receive this grace; and herein is perfect and eternal peace.”

Notice here how three great themes in Augustinian thought are evoked and converge: wisdom, which is truth and charity; peace and repose in God, on which Augustine dwelt at the close of the Confessions and The City of God; justice, described in the Sermon on the Mount but already present in the commentaries on Genesis, where it is seen as a human quality in Paradise. The seventh beatitude and the gift of wisdom gather up all the yearnings of Augustine’s heart and all the divine promises, which shall fulfill them.

To complete his exposition, Augustine explained the rewards attributed to each beatitude. He saw them as different names given to the one, unique reward that is the Kingdom of heaven, names appropriate to each stage of the journey. The Kingdom was identified with wisdom; fear was its beginning, the peace of God its culmination. It was also presented as an inheritance, consolation, replenishment, mercy, and the vision of God.

The eighth beatitude included and confirmed all the others. It represented humanity in all its perfection. Augustine, using the symbolic figure of fifty days, related it to the feast of Pentecost. This is the final achievement of the work undertaken and brought to completion by the Holy Spirit.

Throughout this schema, full of life and spiritual sensitivity, the main intuition is developed like a musical theme: the ongoing action of the Holy Spirit as the Christian pursues his course from beginning to end along the way of the Beatitudes. I should add that to speak of a spiritual journey as if it were something external to the moral life would be a betrayal of Augustine. His text does not give the slightest evidence of any distinction between morality and spirituality. The moral life is in continual need of the Holy Spirit’s help and grace, as St. Augustine later affirmed so forcefully in his writings against the Pelagians.

The parallel between St. Matthew’s Beatitudes and the gifts of the Holy Spirit in Psalm 11 was St. Augustine’s own concept and illustrates his influence on the numerous medieval writers who would comment on the Beatitudes. Scholastic theologians were to retain the idea, giving it a new form. Taking as their moral foundation the theological and cardinal virtues, they would relate them to the gifts and Beatitudes in the manner of St. Augustine. St. Thomas, notably, would introduce this concept of morality into the very structure of his Summa. He would base morality on the connections among the virtues, gifts, and Beatitudes, adding to them the fruits of the Holy Spirit mentioned in the Letter to the Galatians. He would work out precise definitions of the gifts and Beatitudes, which became classic and, in the secunda secundae he would have one beatitude correspond to each virtue, adopting the relationships established by St. Augustine. We could never understand these connections in the Summa without some knowledge of St. Augustine’s commentary on the Sermon.

Once again we witness the encounter of the two great theological geniuses of the Western church. It is true that some historians, such as Dom Lottin, have thought that St. Thomas’s teaching on the gifts of the Holy Spirit was determined by the weight of tradition. However, the Angelic Doctor was hardly passive in his use of Augustine’s ideas. In the Summa his discussion of the commentary on the Sermon is highly personal, far more so than that of any of his forerunners or of his own earlier works.

5. The Seven Petitions of the Our Father

St. Augustine’s fifth intuition was to establish the connections (2.11.38) among the seven Beatitudes, the gifts, and the petitions of the Our Father. This idea, too, was introduced with the words “It seems to me . . . ,” suggesting that Augustine once more saw himself as an innovator. In his division of the Our Father, St. Augustine had already shown his originality. As Mutzenbecher observes (op. cit. P. XII), he was the first to have spoken of seven petitions. The Greek Fathers saw only six, for they combined the last two on temptation and evil. As with the Beatitudes, St. Augustine’s interpretation inclined to the number seven. He maintained this division of the Our Father in his later works (except for Sermon 58.10.10 and his De dono perseverantiae 5.9). Here again the sevenfold stands for plenitude. The Our Father is the perfect prayer and should accompany the Christian throughout life.

Even if St. Augustine did not say so explicitly, we can easily guess the source of his inspiration. The Christian cannot follow the way of the Beatitudes and virtues without the help of the Holy Spirit, and we cannot obtain this help without continual prayer, the model for which is the Lord’s Prayer.

This, then, is the profound import of the parallel Augustine established: the need for prayer at each stage of the Christian’s journey. This being said, we can no longer be so brash as to accuse him of artificiaility or ingenuousness.10

10. Cf. Father Buzy’s article “Beatitudes” in the Dictionnaire de Spiritualité, col. 1309:
In the letter to Proba (Letters, 130) we have Augustine's entire thinking on the importance of the Our Father: "Whatever words we use (in prayer) . . . there is nothing we can say that is not found in the Lord's Prayer, as long as we pray fittingly. But if anyone says something not in accord with this prayer, even if there is nothing intrinsically wrong with his prayer, it will be somewhat carnal. For I don't know how you could call it good, since all who are reborn in the Spirit ought to pray only according to the Spirit." The Our Father was therefore the prayer of the Lord inspired by the Spirit; this is why all Christian prayer should be in accord with it. It could be called a universal prayer.

To develop this idea, Augustine related each petition of the Our Father to a beatitude and a gift. We note that he moved from the gift to the petition, doubtless because of the direct link between the Holy Spirit and prayer. (The accompanying chart illustrates his plan.)

St. Augustine concluded by drawing attention to the Lord's fifth petition, for mercy, which is our only escape from misfortune.

It is obvious—and Augustine was fully aware of this—that this is not a hard and fast arrangement. It is comparable to the development of a musical theme, which is not necessarily the only possible one. The important thing is that an arrangement should be balanced and expressive, meaningful for meditation and action.

We should also note that Augustine was not speaking here of a succession by stages. The petitions of the Our Father form, rather, an accompaniment to all the gifts and Beatitudes taken together.

Prolongation in History

Later tradition, up to the seventeenth century, adopted the parallelism of the Our Father with the gifts and Beatitudes. We find it in Raban Maur (PL 107, col. 822) and in St. Peter Damian (PL 144, col. 814).

But with Paschase Radbert (PL 120, col. 220ff.) there was a surprising reversal of the order of petitions, so that the beatitude of the poor in spirit and the gift of fear were made to correspond with the final petition for deliverance from evil, and so forth. This new order reappeared in a homily of St. Anselm (PL 158, cols. 595–97), as well as the commentary on St. Matthew by Godfrey of Angers, attributed to Anselm of Laon. This interpretation had the advantage of beginning with the humblest

"This time, with the interweaving of exegesis and theology, we have reached an apex of cleverness. Let us say that this [system] has succeeded in pleasing those who love intricate combinations; but it is so artificial that there would be little point in trying to include it in the current spirituality of Holy Church."

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gifts and Beatitudes</th>
<th>Petitions of the Lord’s Prayer</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Fear of the Lord gives happiness to the poor through the promise of the Kingdom.</td>
<td>1. Hallowing of the divine name through chaste fear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Piety gladdens the humble of heart, who will inherit the earth.</td>
<td>2. That God’s kingdom may come.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Knowledge gives joy to those who mourn, through the consolation it brings.</td>
<td>3. That God’s will may be done in our souls and bodies, so that we may be established in peace and comforted in our inner struggles.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Fortitude gives happiness to those who hunger and thirst, and satisfies them.</td>
<td>4. Request for daily bread to sustain us with sufficient nourishment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Counsel gives joy to the merciful.</td>
<td>5. Forgiveness of others’ debts to us and of our own by God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Understanding delights the pure of heart with vision.</td>
<td>6. Avoidance of temptations which create duplicity of heart; the simplicity of a heart fixed on God.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Wisdom brings happiness to the peacemakers, the children of God.</td>
<td>7. Deliverance from evil frees us to be God’s children, crying out: Abba, Father!</td>
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the Augustinian interpretation but followed a descending order. He began with the first petition and related it to the gift of wisdom, according to the order inaugurated by Paschase Radbert, and he ended it with the seventh petition, corresponding to the beatitude of the poor in spirit. He then added the relation between the active and the contemplative life, with a few other considerations.

In the Summa, St. Thomas repeated the affirmation in the letter to Proba, that all Christian prayer, which expresses our desires, should be in harmony with the Our Father. The latter teaches us not only what we ought to ask for but also in what order. Thus the Our Father is the prayer that forms all our affections (informativa totius nostri affectus). It governs the whole realm of affectivity and desire. The order of the petitions follows the structure of the prima secundae: the relation between God's ultimate end and all that is ordered thereto. The same kind of interpretation was used for the question of happiness as for the Beatitudes (IaIIae, q 69, a 3). The Lord's Prayer expresses the desire that impels us toward the divine beatitude as our ultimate end. It dominates our entire moral life.

In this article the correspondence of petitions with gifts and Beatitudes appears only in the ad 3 (q 83 a 9), where St. Thomas deemed it sufficient to cite St. Augustine's text in the commentary on the Sermon, following Augustine's order this time: first beatitude, first petition, and so forth. Contrary to the opinion of Father Buzy (“Beatitudes,” in the Dictionnaire de spiritualité), St. Thomas truly adopted the Augustinian parallelism of the petitions of the Lord's Prayer with the gifts and used the original text. However, in the more rigorous ordering in the Summa, which follows its own logic, he could not accord it primary consideration.

Nonetheless when St. Thomas preached on the Our Father in Naples, toward the end of his life, he explained each petition in the Lord's Prayer in the light of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and followed the exact order used by Augustine in his preaching in Hippo, thus showing his deep esteem for it. Yet it is surprising that he mentioned the gifts only after the second petition. This is due to the fact that the first part of the text in our possession, up to the first petition, is not authentic.\footnote{Cf. B. G. Guyot, “Aldebrandinus de Toscanella: source de la la Petitio des éditiones de S. Thomas sur le Pater,” Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum 53 (1983): 175–201.}

The Sermon on the Mount

Summary

Our study has shown the fruitfulness of Augustine's commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. Rarely has any preaching had such resonance. This commentary was to be the principle source of numerous explanations of the Sermon, from the sixth to the thirteenth century. Its dominant concepts would be adopted by scholasticism and introduced, with variations, into the new theological structures. The utilization of this work was particularly important for St. Thomas in the composition of the Summa theologiae. Augustine's intuitions contributed to the determination of the New Law's place in the Sermon on the Mount and to the basing of Christian morality on the foundation of the treatise on beatitude. They inspired the arrangement of the Second Part according to the parallelism of virtues, gifts, and Beatitudes, and reappeared in the interpretation of the Lord's Prayer as the "form" of every prayer together with the virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

History has proved the richness of Augustine's commentary on the Sermon through facts, which a simple reading of the text does not yield. It is a valuable source for preaching, exegesis, and theology, and can be considered as a model for Christian meditation on Scripture.

The Role of the Commentary Today

What was the ultimate destiny of St. Augustine's commentary on the Sermon? It continued to be read, certainly, and is still cited today as a classic commentary. Nevertheless, it hardly produces the same fruits in our time that it did in the Middle Ages. The advent of nominalism and the concentration of moral teaching on obligation have made this impossible. After morality became mainly a matter of commands and prohibitions—without any consideration, among its basic elements, of the Beatitudes and the action of the Holy Spirit, and finally with the separation of morality from spirituality—the full theological and moral significance of St. Augustine's commentary was no longer understood. Ethicists saw in it merely a work of spirituality with some interesting interpretations of problems such as divorce. What they did not realize, however, was that this attitude marginalized the Sermon on the Mount itself as something extrinsic to morality. This was in direct opposition to Augustine's initial affirmation that the Sermon of the Lord was the perfect model or charter for the Christian life. Moral teaching would once more center around the Decalogue. No one seemed to realize that
such a conception carried with it a serious risk of regressing to the level of Old Testament justice.

**The Augustinian Response to the Question of the Impracticality of the Sermon on the Mount**

In this context, the difficulty that obstructs and divides modern exegetes in regard to the Sermon carries greater weight than ever. With all its precepts, surely the Sermon commands the impossible? We can surmise how St. Augustine would have answered this question, if today’s scholars had put it to him.

He would certainly have begun by clarifying the origin of ethics: it originates with the question of happiness, not with obligations. This has a direct bearing on the relation between ethics and the Sermon. If ethics is a matter of obligations, it cannot possibly assimilate the Sermon. The Lord’s teaching penetrates the depths of human nature far too intimately to be viewed as a body of strict commands imposed by an external law.

On the other hand the question of happiness gives rise to an ethical system based on the attraction to truth and goodness, which readily harmonizes with the promises of the Beatitudes and the paths traced out by the Gospel precepts. Linked with the desire for happiness, the teaching of the Sermon penetrates to our inmost souls and responds to our deepest aspirations, purifying them and directing them to God. The inner logic of the two systems is born out by history. The Sermon played a major role in the happiness-based morality of the great Christian tradition. Later moral constructs of obligation, whether Catholic or Protestant, have been incapable of adopting or adequately explaining the teaching of the Sermon.

To the question of how the precepts in the Sermon could possibly be carried out, St. Augustine would answer in the words of Jesus: “For men, this is impossible; for God everything is possible” (Mt 19:26)—by recourse to the gift of Christ’s grace, which is proper to the New Testament, as the entire patristic tradition teaches. In our commentary, grace refers specifically to the action of the Holy Spirit working through the Beatitudes and gifts. Thus we could say that the main lesson of the Sermon is about the works the Holy Spirit wishes to accomplish in us through the power of his grace, with our humble and docile cooperation, as described in the Beatitudes. The Sermon gives us the Spirit’s promises and calls us to hope before telling us what we must do. Through the work of the Spirit, the precepts prompt us first to the inner obedience of love. By removing the study of grace and the gifts of the Spirit from moral theology, today’s ethicists lose the specifically Christian principle that should enable them to answer the question about the practicability of the Sermon.

In his answer, Augustine united St. Paul’s teaching on life in the Spirit and St. Matthew’s on true justice so closely that they became inseparable. His association of the two concepts flowed from his meditation on Scripture and tradition and on his personal experience. This is what we might call experiential exegesis, in which understanding is acquired by living the faith and reflecting upon it.

Again, it is significant that modern theology has eliminated the patristic tradition in separating St. Matthew and St. Paul, either by the Protestant split between faith and works or by the Catholic concentration on obligation. The result is the same for both: Christian ethics loses the Sermon on the Mount and has no way of answering the difficulty about putting it into practice. Yet the Lord’s word could hardly be more explicit and imperative: “Everyone who listens to these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a stupid man who built his house on sand” (Mt 7:26). Does this not apply to ethicists and theologians?

**A Specifically Christian Ethics**

St. Augustine’s answer to the question of whether or not there is a specifically Christian ethics was very clear. He gave a preliminary outline drawn straight from the Gospel and based on a few dominant ideas. It was concentrated in three textual blocks: the Beatitudes, followed by the precepts or ways leading to them; the gifts of the Holy Spirit according to Isaiah; and the Lord’s Prayer. It is wholly remarkable that St. Thomas, having personally re-read the commentary on the Sermon, used precisely these “intuitions” of Augustine to shape the Second Part of his *Summa*. It can be proven historically, moreover, that Augustine’s text on the Beatitudes was the principal and most profound source for his own treatise on happiness, even before Aristotle’s *Ethics*. St. Thomas always read the Sermon on the Mount looking over Augustine’s shoulder. If he occasionally took liberties in his interpretation, he still shared the principal themes and gave them their entire theological weight.

**Toward a Renewal of Christian Ethics**

By way of conclusion, we can draw a few lessons from the teachings of St. Augustine that may contribute to the contemporary elaboration of an ethical system that is Christian.
1. The Sermon of the Lord is a perfect model or charter for Christian living. The Sermon must once again become a basic text and primary source of moral theology, ahead of the Decalogue, natural law, or an assemblage of norms or rights established by pure reason. In the face of the rationalism of our times, this demands of us an audacious faith in the solidity of the Gospel, both at the intellectual and at the moral level. This is our only real chance to shore up today's moral edifice, shaken as it is to its very foundations by the winds, storms, and floods of our age.

It is less a matter of returning to Augustine and St. Thomas than of going back to the actual Word of God, the Gospel text inspired by the Holy Spirit in faith. In doing this we shall be following those two masters who made themselves servants of the Lord's Sermon. Their words are no substitutes for the Gospel, but they lead us to it. This is how we ought to read and exploit them.

Neither is it a question of reshaping moral theology in the material form of the Sermon on the Mount. These are two distinct literary genres, different types of teaching. Theology should express in its own language the dominant ideas of the Sermon, which convey the new justice. Moral theology would thus become the fruit of the Sermon on the Mount.

2. Interpretation of the Sermon and consequent shaping of moral theology in light of the Beatitudes. Reintegrating the study of happiness in moral theology and giving it the primary role in light of the Beatitudes implies a veritable revolution for contemporary ethics. Duty-driven, compelled by obligations and commands, modern ethics is faced with a dilemma: either conform to morality and give up the idea of happiness, or seek happiness and abandon morality. The choice is crucial.

The Sermon, and St. Augustine's and St. Thomas's interpretations of it, can help us to reconcile morality with the desire for happiness. The reconciliation will not be easy, for it postulates an in-depth reshaping of morality. The concept of duty will no longer be central, but will be subordinated to that of virtue, and virtue's vitality and dynamism will have to be rediscovered.

3. The interpretation of the Beatitudes as seven stages of the Christian life. St. Augustine's interpretation is one of many. Its advantage is that it shows the historic dimension of the Beatitudes, their integration in Christian history and in the history of the pilgrim Church. It harmonizes therefore with salvation history and lived experience. It also alerts us to the fact that we need to practice the Gospel virtues, from humility to purity of heart, if we are to acquire a vital understanding of the Sermon and to build up theology.

4. The correlation of Beatitudes to gifts. This leads us to abandon the separation between morality and spirituality (ascetical and mystical), in order to give morality a truly spiritual dimension, as "life in the Spirit." It is through the gifts, in fact, that the Holy Spirit inspires Christian life, giving believers interior light and impulse. The gifts are far more important for Christian living than all the charisms we hear so much about in the Church today.

5. The relation between the Lord's Prayer, the gifts, and the Beatitudes. There must be a link between personal and liturgical prayer—where the Our Father was placed—and theology. Today we realize more and more the need for prayer in theological reflection. Under the influence of rationalism, we have too long believed that theology was a work of pure reason and prayer a matter of emotion. We have forgotten that the theologian cannot acquire an experiential, accurate understanding of what he teaches without the light of grace and therefore of prayer, without his share in the gifts of wisdom, understanding, knowledge, and counsel.

Actually, whether or not we integrate prayer in the process of theological reflection is going to affect the essence of theology itself and its insertion into the current of faith. The principle underlying St. Augustine's own research convinces us of this. His assertion, "Unless you believe, you will not understand," can easily translate into: "Unless you pray, you will not understand."

As a final remark, let me say that we have no need to fear presenting the Sermon on the Mount to unbelievers, on the pretext that only a natural ethic is appropriate for them. Experience shows, and the reading of commentaries confirms it: the Sermon touches non-Christians more deeply and has far greater appeal than any moral theory based on natural law in the name of reason. It is as if the Sermon strikes a human chord more "natural" and universal than reason by itself can ever do.

However this may be, we can never stop preaching the Sermon on the Mount to everyone. Theology is at the service of this kind of preaching. It is, in its own way, a commentary on the Gospel, designed to show us how to apply it in all the dimensions of life. And it is here that the works of St. Augustine and St. Thomas can be our models. This is precisely why they were written.
III. TOWARD A REDISCOVERY OF PRIMITIVE MORAL CATECHESIS

The two studies we have just made, on St. Matthew and St. Paul, put us on the way to a rediscovery of primitive moral catechesis. Once we realize that morality is not limited to the narrow confines of obligations and commands but includes as its best part the study of happiness and the virtues, the moral teaching in the New Testament stands out in all its rich fulness. Biblical texts abound to illustrate this and have pride of place in the Scriptures, as the necessary supplement to the preaching of the faith. Obviously we are dealing here, as the Fathers of the Church saw clearly, with the earliest authentic sources of catechesis and Christian moral theology. We need to return to these again and again, to enrich our thought and our lives. A summary of the main texts of catechesis in apostolic times follows.

The Primary Text: The Sermon on the Mount

The primary text is none other than the Sermon on the Mount, proposed by St. Matthew as a summary of Jesus’ teaching on justice and the moral precepts appropriate for his disciples. We have in this a clearly defined catechesis, which has been called a charter of the Christian life. The Sermon is unique in its authority; it enjoys the authority of the Lord himself, expressed in the clearest terms: “I have come not to abolish but to complete... It was said... but I say this to you...” “His teaching made a deep impression on the people because he taught them with authority” (Mt 5:17, 21–22; 7:28). Clearly in the mind of the apostolic community this was a primary source of moral teaching. It would have to be included in any theology fully faithful to the Gospel.

We should note that the Sermon, like the entire Gospel, is addressed to all, beginning with the poor and humble. St. John Chrysostom and St. Augustine knew this well and said it to the people. It can hardly be viewed therefore simply as a counsel reserved for the chosen few. The teaching is unequivocal: if you wish to enter the Kingdom of heaven, you must practice Gospel “justice.” If you do this you are building on rock; if not, on sand.

The Sermon of the Lord is a model of the moral teaching of the primitive Church. It begins with the gift of the Beatitudes, which fulfill the promises of the Old Testament. With St. Thomas, we see them as Christ’s answer to the search for happiness. This teaching deepens the precepts of the Decalogue, penetrating to the “heart,” where actions are conceived in the depths of a person and where virtues are formed, ranging from humility and gentleness to love for enemies.

The style of the Sermon is typical of a catechesis with its short sentences summing up the doctrine and its carefully worked-out composition, easily memorized and passed on to others.

Apostolic Exhortation or Paraclesis

Moral teaching was expanded with apostolic exhortation, called paracesis rather than parenesis. We have to admit that the kind of apostolic exhortation found in the Sermon of the Lord is almost entirely rejected by modern ethicists. It is now considered as a minor, unimportant genre useful only for people who are aiming at perfection. It is sharply distinguished from a duty-driven morality or ethic, and is given the name parenesis to indicate that it is optional.

Once again, the mistake is a serious one, for exhortation seems to have been the characteristic mode of apostolic moral teaching. If we are faithful to the primitive Christian vocabulary, we will replace paracesis, a term very rarely used, (three times only: in Luke 3:18 and in Acts 27:2 and 22) with paraclesis, which designates an earnest exhortation. We might think of it as a technical term in St. Paul, for he often uses it to introduce moral teaching in his letters. For example, “Think of God’s mercy, my brothers, and worship him, I beg you” (Rom 12:1. See also Phil 2:1; Eph 4:1 and I Peter 2:11). Paraclesis puts us in a relationship with God that has passed beyond legal justice to mercy. It is the most appropriate mode for the apostle when he is transmitting the doctrine of the Lord’s mercy to his disciples, who have become his brothers and whom he addresses with the tenderness of a father. He does not give them orders as if they were servants, for he has already opened their hearts to love. He exhorts them by word and example, as his brothers and friends.

Pauline paraclesis is therefore definitely a part of moral teaching. It is catechesis similar to the Sermon of the Lord, but given in a manner suited to the apostle, whose authority is delegated. It is phrased in a chiseled style to insure its being passed on. The sentences are short and rhythmic and make use of assonance, as for example in Romans 12:9–13.

We have here a principal source of moral theology, constantly adopted
by the Fathers of the Church in their teaching. The liturgy too provides this regularly.

It is important not to separate these moral passages from the dogmatic ones preceding them; for example, the parables of Romans, chapters 12 to 15, should not be separated from the earlier chapters on the faith that justifies. This kind of separation is an arbitrary cutting, due usually to some later theological problematic, Catholic or Protestant. The virtues taught by the Apostle in his parables are the direct and necessary result of the faith that justifies and the love of Christ poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. They are always related, often in an explicit and profound way, to the mystery of Christ: “In your minds you must be the same as Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5).

A listing of the principle passages containing moral catechesis found in the letters of the apostles, in biblical order, follows.

Romans 12–15. The Christian life is presented as a liturgy, a spiritual worship we give to God by offering him our bodies and our persons within the Body of Christ. We have become Christ’s members through baptism, and his charity animates us.

1 Corinthians. After having discussed a series of “cases of conscience” solved mainly in their relation to Christ and having to do with incest, appeal to pagan courts, fornication, etc., chapters 12 and 13 give us the hierarchy of the gifts of the Spirit. These are ruled by charity, which binds together the Body of Christ, the Church, and inspires all the other virtues, ministries, and charisms.

Galatians 5. A description of the spiritual combat, in which the flesh is opposed to the fruits of the Spirit, of which charity is the first.

Ephesians 4–5. An exhortation to unity in one Body and one Spirit and to the putting off of the old man to be reclothed in the New Man, “created in God’s way, in the goodness and holiness of the truth.”

Philippians 2:1–17 and 3:1–4, 9. An exhortation to imitate the sentiments of Christ in the humility and obedience of the cross in order to share in his glory, and to become imitators of St. Paul, stretching forward on his course to win the prize of the knowledge of Christ Jesus.

Colossians 3:1–4, 10. An exhortation to live a life hidden in Christ, to put on the new man, “a new self which will progress towards true knowledge the more it is renewed in the image of its creator.” (Notice too, in Colossians and Ephesians, the two great initial hymns describing the mystery of Christ, given for Christian hope and contemplation: they show us our destiny in the divine plan.)

1 Thessalonians 4–5. An exhortation to holiness and vigilance while awaiting the Day of the Lord, as children of the light, in imitation of Christ, who lives anew in our fraternal imitation of him.

We should also note in their entirety: The Letter of James and his sapiential teaching, so delightfully concrete; The First Letter of Peter, which is a real gem of moral exhortation (its teaching is often reminiscent of St. Paul and the Sermon on the Mount); The First Letter of John, with its great themes of light, sin and the world, charity and faith.

In my opinion, there can be no renewal of moral theology today without the rediscovery and exploitation of these Gospel sources. They alone can restore to moral theology its true dimension and spiritual vitality.

Finally, we should not overlook the riches of moral experience found in the Old Testament, notably in the sapiential books. These are frequently used by the authors of the New Testament.