



The "mercy" in St. Augustine's Confessions.

### **A word in which there is no despair**

A humanistic-spiritual commentary based on the analysis of the word "mercy" in Confessions

This is the title of one of the most famous works in history. St. Augustine has influenced many authors and has had the fortune to find great readers like San Anselm, San Albert Magnus, and Saint Thomas, Petrarca, Luther, Pascal, Malebranche, Rousseau.

**The Confessions are**, as the title implies, a work where the holy bishop discovers his soul and the action of God in his life until his 33 years of age approximately. In them, he narrates his childhood, adolescence, his studies and reflections, his search for truth and his conversion to the Christian faith.

Already from the first line you can understand that their confessions have, indeed, a very particular recipient, God himself: "You are great, Lord, and very worthy of praise: great is your power and your wisdom has no limits; man wishes to praise you, being a part of your creation; man, who carries his mortal being everywhere, who carries with him the testimony of his sin and his own testimony, because you resist the proud; and yet, the man, who is a parcel of your creation, wants to praise you. "

This beginning, which echoes several psalms of the Scriptures, enunciates the great themes that the holy bishop of Hippo will treat: he wants to praise God, manifesting to him his limits and confessing him his sin. It is not mere coincidence that St. Augustine has thus titled Confessions, for the word "confession" (confiteri in Latin) appears numerous times throughout the book, ninety times, to be precise.

We should then ask ourselves why he did not call it rather The Mercies since the word « mercy » appears the same number of times as the verb « to confess ». Between the two terms, there is a clear relationship: to ninety confessions

correspond ninety manifestations of mercy.

This short article intends to discover what is hidden behind this happy coincidence in terms. We ruled out the assumption that St. Augustine has drawn it this way from the outset. Rather, we must sharpen the ear of the spirit and refine our capacity for analysis to faithfully interpret the work of mercy in The Confessions of St. Augustine.

An autobiography in the form of prayer

The Confessions, written between 397 and 401 A.D., is one of the first autobiographical books of the universal literature. Books that tend to the introspection of the author on himself had already appeared in previous eras to Saint Augustine, like the Meditations of the emperor Marcus Aurelius, written at the end of the II century A.D. But there is a great difference in the introspection of St. Augustine, because The Confessions are presented as a dialogue with God and with the men who will read his work: Behold, you love the truth, for the one who lives it comes to the light. I want to live it in my heart confessing in front of you and, on the other hand, in front of many witnesses with my writing.

This touch of faith makes The Confessions unique writing because St. Augustine dares to manifest his life before the God who knows him deeply. He says to God: "And before you, Lord, for whose eyes the abyss of human consciousness remains naked, what would be hidden in me, even if I did not want to confess? I'd cover you up without seeing you and not me without you seeing me. "

St. Augustine is not naïve and realizes that it would suffice to communicate to God his repentance, without having to divulge his life to the four winds and, therefore, exclaims with some spark: «Then, what do men have to do with me, as if , by hearing my confessions, they were going to heal all my weaknesses? » The acute mind of St. Augustine recognizes that, even if he is confessed, his readers could not even be sure that he is telling them the whole truth. And here is precisely the touch of witty faith and believing genius of this holy bishop: he will confess his life to God, so that others may hear, even if they cannot know for certain whether he is telling the truth or not; but you are sure that charity, which is a divine gift, will open your ears, so that you can believe this bishop who confesses his human misery. In this autobiography that Saint Augustine weaves with human needle and divine thread, the role of Mercy is central, because his words are directed to the God who can heal him, but also to all of us, who can find the hope of being healed:

"For The Confessions of my past sins, which you forgave and covered [...], when they are read and heard, borrow the heart [of the one who hears], that he may not fall asleep in despair and say: " I cannot! "; but stay awake in the love of your mercy and in the sweetness of your grace, for which every weak man is powerful, being conscious, thanks to her, of his weakness. "

The prayer that St. Augustine began to praise God is concluded in book XIII with

this request: "Begging to you, being sought in you and calling you; thus and only thus will be received, will be found and will be opened to us». And this long prayer of The Confessions concludes with a brief "Amen", the ultimate proof that it is a deeply Christian prayer.

### The source of mercy

We have already clarified that the word "mercy" and "misericords" are found ninety times in the text of The Confessions. But the question should be asked if these words were used before St. Augustine by other non-Christian authors. The answer is affirmative. For example, in the complete works of Cicero (69 works, without counting the fragments) they appear 162 times. And that Cicero is the author who uses them the most. Therefore, pagan authors also knew and used the words "mercy/misericordia", but the use of these two terms is much more common in the Bible and Christian authors. For example, it suffices to note that the frequency of these two words in the whole works of the saint of Hippo surpasses the use that the 362 authors of the corpus of the Packard Humanities Institute (which contains all the Latin texts previous to 200 A. D.) make of them together.

The first observation that we can make on these technical data is that it is not a simple counting of words, but that Christians use these two terms more because they have a much deeper meaning for them than for non-Christian authors, who used the same language but did not have the same faith. There are some interesting facts that we need to highlight. Most of the biblical texts quoted by our saint in Confessions come from the Psalms. Saint Augustine quotes more than 500 times the psalms. And the psalms are the book of the Bible that contains more times the word mercy and merciful (33% of the total in the version of the Vulgate). What a coincidence!

This means that, if we compare the biblical texts that refer to mercy with a target, the book of psalms would be located at the center of it. St. Augustine in his Confessions is right in the center. This harmony between the psalms and St. Augustine is no coincidence. St. Augustine uses a lot of bible quotes on all the pages of The Confessions. It would almost be said that his autobiography is a mixture of the facts of his life and multiple quotes from the Bible. But within the Bible, there are books that he cites most often, such as the psalms, the gospels, and the letters of St. Paul. Therefore, our second observation is that the importance of mercy in this work springs from the roots of the Word of God and especially the psalms.

For example, Saint Augustine borrows the words of Psalm 58 in various passages: "My God, my mercy." And this is the quote on mercy repeated the most (five times). He could have chosen another appointment, but the fact that it is this, where God is called "mercy of mine", leaves no room for doubt about the intimate place that occupies the mercy in the soul of this bishop of Africa. The source of mercy in this work is the Word of God. But, we can legitimately ask whether he is

simply repeating quotes from the Bible or whether he has made this word his own because it reflects personal experience.

There is a personal touch. And there are several proofs of that, even at the textual level. Two expressions about God are wholly original in St. Augustine: When he speaks of how God has treated him "with a merciful hand"; and when he calls God the "source of mercies." The use of the superlative "most merciful" (A little strange in Spanish) is from St. Augustine because the Vulgate Bible does not use it at all. It is interesting to note that when the most authoritative dictionary in Latin (the *Lexicon Totius Latinitatis*) quotes a writer of authority who has used this superlative quotation precisely to St. Augustine. This brief analysis of the terms "misericords/mercy" in *The Confessions* allows us to have a firm basis with which to discover the authenticity and resonance they had for their author. At the end of the day, the source of mercy for St. Augustine is God himself, as we are allowed to glimpse the barely exposed data. But it would be a little poor to stay with these textual reflections only. St. Augustine has left us in *The Confessions* and other writings several clues to understanding the profound impact that God's mercy had on his life.

#### Misery, mercy, and hope

St. Augustine has left us in a sermon (358/a) an etymological explanation of "mercy": it is but a certain misery of the heart that one drags. It was called mercy by the sorrow of the miserable: both words are there contained, both misery, and the heart [cor in Latin]. Therefore, when the misery of others touches and strikes your heart, it is called "mercy." This simple explanation applied to God means that "divine mercy" is given when our misery touches and strikes the heart of God. It's no small thing. But the subject is not exhausted there. We have said that psalm 58 is the most quoted by our author about mercy. Well, St. Augustine has left us two comments on this psalm. A proof of the special affection for the psalms is that everyone commented. Psalm 58 dedicates, as we have said, two comments. And in the second explanation that makes Psalm 58 we read: Anyway, [the psalmist] considering all the goods we can have of any kind in life, in society, in the company of others, in faith, in hope, in charity, in good manners, in the fear of God, considering that everything comes from the gifts [of God], concludes thus: My God, my mercy. Being already brimming with the gifts of God, there is no name for him but "his mercy". Oh, name, under whose shelter no one can lose hope!

For our author, mercy was intimately related to hope. In fact, when you ask with which fruit you share your confessions with others, he tells God: What fruit, my Lord, with whom my conscience is confessed daily, being safer in the hope of your mercy than in your innocence; With what fruit, tell me, do I confess also in front of men through this writing...?

Two other texts confirm the fundamental role of hope in *The Confessions*. It is the request made by St. Augustine to his readers to pray for his deceased mother, Santa Monica. And remember what St. Paul wrote in the letter to the Romans: "I

will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." Then, when he talks about his own life, he dares to add a word to the beginning of this same phrase - the word *Altius* in Latin - and thus opens up a great horizon: «You will sympathize more deeply with whom you have pitied and give mercy to the one you have already had». It seems, then, that God's mercy increases every time He acts. And, therefore, divine mercy is a cause of deep hope, because, following the second comment to psalm 58, none of those who protect it has the right to despair.

## Conclusion

We have seen that *The Confessions* is a particular book. It is a prayer in the form of autobiography and, at the same time, a literary autobiography in the form of prayer. Our article has tried to suggest a new reading key of this book of unfathomable depth and deep intimacy, which can be read with so diverse approaches.

The reading key we propose is mercy seen from hope. We summarize it like this: our misery is only overcome by our hope and our hope is only sustained by the mercy of God; therefore, God's mercy is the only hope for our misery. That is the great lesson of *The Confessions* from the optics of mercy. It is in the hands of the reader to take the book of *The Confessions* and dive into it. The reading of this great book is always something very personal, so much so that not even the first biographer of St. Augustine, Posidio, who was African and was also a bishop, dared to deal with what his bishop and friend had already counted in his autobiography: «Nec Nottingham ea omnia insinuates, quae idem beatissimus Augustinus in suis Confessionum libris de semetipso [...] designavit».

Posidio says, "I will not try to outline all that Saint Augustine himself confessed in his books of *The Confessions* about himself." to read *The Confessions* is to read the soul of St. Augustine.