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“Desire, Memory, and Searching for God”

Kevin Grove, CSC
 Rev. John Zahm, CSC, Lecture
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[Slide 1] It is an honor for me to be with you here at the University of Portland to deliver this year’s Zahm lecture. But, I must begin this night acknowledging that those of us who do research, study, and indeed minister stand on the shoulders of giants—intellectual and spiritual ones like Fr. Zahm. Since the last Zahm lecture, the Congregation of Holy Cross sent home to God one of its great theologians, Fr. John S. Dunne, C.S.C., **[Slide 2]** who had taught fifty years’ worth of undergraduate students and published over a dozen books. The title of my lecture is in part a tribute to one of his greatest books, *A Search for God in Time and Memory*.

[Slide 3] Now, let me open with an anecdote. My first formal dinner in graduate school in England was like living in an old movie. A centuries old-dining hall, academic robes, and candles on tables were but the setting for the welcome of the master and toasts to a new year. But, as is the custom, the dinner ended with most of the students, still dressed in their nicest, moving to a nearby pub to carry on the conversations. Dressed in my blacks, as I am tonight, I approached the bar in that local pub in order to request my pint. And there two Americans my age—a young man and a young woman not part of our group—stopped me in order to ask me a question. The young man looked up at me and inquired bluntly, “Are you for real?” I get a lot of odd questions, but that was a first. “Excuse me?” I replied. He repeated for clarity: “Are you for real, are you really a priest?” By God’s grace, I somehow summoned the right question in response. I blurted out, “Of course, I am for real and I am really a priest. What do you do? And are you for real?” I can admit now that I was chuffed when he was surprised. But as it turned out, his job was as un-real as my own. He was an FBI agent. The young woman standing next to him was CIA counter terrorism. They had finished an assignment in London and had an afternoon off in Cambridge. At this point I realize that this starts to sound like a bad joke: a priest, an FBI agent, and a CIA agent stand at a bar talking about reality. But it was for real, ended up being a remarkable conversation, and the FBI agent purchased the pint.

I begin with that story because when one someone like me begins a lecture about desire, memory, and searching for God, it can often enough be the case that one assumes an entire lecture hall is going to forget about reality for forty whole minutes, leaving behind the strictures of reason. But that, of course, is the opposite of what we are going to do tonight. We are going after God as the one who is the most-real, and we will take up that adventure by means of two things—desire and memory. In that order.

If we are going to go searching for God, we need to know how it is that we go searching in general. For each of us, that means identifying how we desire and what things we desire. And if I were just to cast the question out there like that and poll the auditorium, I would certainly get excellent answers: perhaps we desire happiness, or love, or community, success, affirmation, etc. But, I want to suggest a different way of labeling those things this evening—a way very old but in some ways very new. It begins with a snapshot. The first building block we need to put in place is going to be one that relies on scripture—though a bit of a whirlwind tour of it. I need you to picture the moment when in the Garden of Eden, that the fruit is described on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eve looks at the tree and sees that it—in the words of a single verse of Genesis--“was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise.” (3:6) **[Slide 4]**

Now, Genesis, of course was not composed by a third party observer—a hidden journalist or anthropologist there in the garden, but really was quite late as far as Old Testament books go. And what is remarkable about this scriptural text is that it captures a way of describing three desires that would have been intelligible across ancient near eastern civilizations. [Slide 5] The first, taking them in the order that Genesis puts them, is the desire of the flesh—the fruit of the tree was good for food. In other words, those human desires that relate to physical embodiment: food, drink, sex, etc. The second phrase in that tightly packed bit of Scripture is “delight to the eyes.” This, the desire of the eyes, is for ownership of things of the world: anything that one might see with his or her eyes and seek to have, control, or use. And finally, the third desire was for that which would make one wise. This desire was called pride of life, or sometimes worldly ambition, and the wisdom coming from the tree would augment that in a very important manner. When I first found these three things, I thought these ancients had a rather good sense of self-knowledge.

Now, for a hugely important point. I am not here to throw a theological wet blanket on human desire. I do not want to squelch it or repress it. No, I want to claim that it is at the core of our tradition and then build on it. And to do that I need to point out one thing about this scripture passage. These three desires: the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and pride of life are present in Genesis’ description of the first man and the first woman—they are desires in them, not in the fruit—**before** they ever sin and disobey God’s command not to eat. That the desires exist is a good thing and we can only hold that they were created as good. So, the narrative account of the first sin is not that food, drink, sex, possessions, and pride are bad. Hardly. It is that they somehow got out of balance. And since that time—both in the Bible and in human history in general—individuals and nations and perhaps even you and I struggle with the integration of the same three desires. We are always flopping back and forth between complete self-denial and total self-indulgence. [Slide 6, 1st Column] We do whatever feels good sometimes at the expense of what is good (desire of the flesh), want more than our fair share (desire of the eyes), and all of our lives run the risk of becoming all about us once in a while (pride of life). [2nd Column]

But there is a much more fascinating part of Christian anthropology, at least of desire. It does not stop with the naming of the three in Genesis. We are going to build it into a chart. I have placed at the left the three we have talked about. Now we are going to press the structure forward a bit. It should come as no surprise that in the New Testament before Jesus ever calls disciples, performs miracles, or preaches, he goes out into the desert to face three desires. There is nothing new here. Christ went out to face his own human desires. That it lasted forty days indicates that this was no small undertaking. While he was out there, a tempter came and asked him to make stones into bread because he was hungry—to feed the desires of his flesh. But he didn’t do it. It’s not that food was bad, but that it could not be stronger than his desire for God. And the tempter took Jesus up onto a very high mountain and showed him every kingdom on earth—every desire the eye could wish to control. Again, he didn’t accept the offer of the tempter, for he would have had to put his possessions before God his Father. In one final flourish, the tempter took him to Jerusalem, to the seat of prayer itself, and told him to throw himself off of the high parapet of the temple and to let God save him—to have so much pride in his life that he would make God serve his own pride. But again, he didn’t do it. And so for the first time in human history we have someone whose actions are a claim on having reintegrated those three desires. Jesus does not suppress or eliminate any of the three desires, just puts them in a different relationship to God. [3rd Column]

But, it gets better. When Jesus does preach he gives his famous Sermon on the Mount and then carries on to describe how it is that people might live out this blessedness. He gives instruction—surprise!—on three practices and how to do them with integrity rather than the Pharisees and the hypocrites. It is worth considering, if the desire of the flesh—for bodily satisfaction—is overpowering at times, what is a way to reverse that in a positive way? Well, quite simply, the answer is to fast, to discipline one’s own consumption in such a way that another might eat. What would it mean to invert an overwhelming desire to own things, to control what is around us, or to own the kingdoms of the earth? The answer is to give

alms, to take what one has and share it with those in need. And finally the opposite of letting our worlds become all about us is, of course, prayer. For anyone who truly prays, “Thy will be done” and intends what those words mean places the will of another before that of themselves. It is a three pronged approach of reintegrating three human desires. **[4th Column]** The point of these is not to make life into a really long Lent such that by means of fasting, almsgiving, and prayer we end up hungry, poor, and grouchy. No, that is a bit like how we integrated our desires when we were six. I gave up candy for forty agonizing days only to spend my mornings and evenings dreaming of an Easter basket filled with jelly beans and chocolate that would make me ill by breakfast as the first rays of resurrection light flickered on Easter Sunday morning! Rather, the point of these practices is that all three are tools for learning to “desire” well.

Some of us, of course, need even more remedial training than others. And since a couple of my brothers in Holy Cross as well as fellow religious Dominican and Benedictine sisters are here I will have some fun at our expense. How does one commit oneself to the long-term course of integrating the three desires? Well, what if we called them vows: a commitment to fleshly control might be chastity. Not succumbing to the desire to own all things but to share what we have in common or with those in need would be poverty. And, of course, putting the will of others before that of ourselves would be that which is called obedience. **[5th Column]** That’s right, the entire religious life—priests, brothers, and sisters is built around this system of trying to work out these three desires. And, at its best, the religious life is understood as itself a school wherein its members by their vows might learn to desire—that is learn to love—well. It is not the only way, of course, but you can see how rooted in Christian anthropology it is.

Our adventure tonight, “Desire, Memory, and Searching for God,” means we have to be serious about what and how we desire. If we are too flippant with these terms, we minimize the day-to-day experiences of what it means to be human—that our physical needs have to be met, that we use materials around us, and that some aspect of pride is at the heart of all we do. I suppose that most often we aren’t able to say that we really feel and act as though our deepest and only desire is to know, love, and serve our God—the old Catechism.¹ Perhaps you don’t, but I can get distracted on the way to finishing that sentence by being, hungry, tired, hot, cold, or alone. In short, our tradition gives us the tools to consider how we might desire “well” as we are...on the way to God. And what I have given tonight is a framework that sits at the heart of St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. Thomas Aquinas picks it up in his *Summa Theologia*, and a number of modern theologians from St. John Paul II to non-Catholic feminist theologians I know in Europe are working through desire using the same schema. But more importantly than claiming these authorities old and new, the question I hope you might consider when you go away from Buckley this evening is whether the descriptions work for you. Augustine, when he preached on a psalm, would say to his congregation, “Let’s see if we can find ourselves in it.” Might I describe my own desires in terms of my flesh, my eyes, and my pride?

And on that note, I will apply this and tell another brief Cambridge story before we move on to memory. I have been very lucky to be a part of this community in Cambridge called Gates. There are around 150 graduate students in residence in any given year, masters and phd students from around the world who study everything imaginable. Every couple of months they have scholars tell about their research in an informal and more personal way, called “Scholar Stories.” In my first two years, I noticed that there was somewhat of a structure to the ways that these talks went: 1. scholar goes to farthest corner of the globe imaginable; 2. scholar delivers to the farthest corner of the globe imaginable one form of education, technology, or liberation; 3. an ngo or systemic change movement begins and the scholar returns changed forever. This would sound appallingly hokey if they weren’t time after time mind numbingly amazing! Now, since God has a sense of humor, I am a Catholic priest in this lot. I have never saved a community, or a language group, or a set of cells, let alone a house-plant, from anything. And when pressured to give

¹ Baltimore Catechism 1.6.

one of these talks, I decided to road test this research, and to give a condensed articulation of exactly what I have given you tonight. I wanted to see if it would translate, if a secular audience might respond. After walking through this theological anthropology, I mentioned that one might find concerns about these three desires—in a less systematic way in say--Freud or Foucault. We might just label them instead of desire of the flesh, the eyes, and pride; we could call them more crassly: money, sex, and power. [6th Column] At the end of the talk, I certainly held my breath before this room of my peers to determine whether my spouting Augustine and scripture would result in my being shunned from the up and coming Cambridge intelligentsia. To my relief and surprise, the q. and a. went on forever...from the secular Jewish technology researcher, the non-practicing Muslim social scientist, the hard-bitten atheist chemist, and the evangelical Protestant biologist. I am using their labels for themselves, not mine. A conversation began that night that has meant that I've started reading histories of modern physics for Lent and have gotten—and I am actually sort of proud of this—thrown out of my friend's science laboratory. But on the other side of it, I look out as I preach on Sunday mornings and see the non-religious, the anti-religious, and those of other religions quietly sitting in the back and taking in every word and action. I suggest to you only this. I am growing more and more convinced that it is worth taking up the perennial conversation about desire, about what we love. And I am saying that the resources coded into the fabric of the Jewish and after it Christian experience of the way of living these desires provide grist for the mill that can extend the conversation far beyond the theology classroom, but to the broader university, and hopefully human community.

But that brings us to the heart of the matter, memory. It is a term that we use to describe much more than what we had for breakfast or where we hope we left our car keys. Memory is a term for how you and I have any sense of a stable reality. Because, if we are honest about the passage of time from the future into the past, the present is just an instant that is constantly slipping away. And to have any coherent account of who we are right now, we have to stitch together our expectations of the future as well as our recollections of the past. Memory is hugely important in defining who we are right now. I spent a short period of time regularly saying Mass for the patients in an Alzheimer's unit of a mental care facility. As the content of many of these patient's memories slowly escaped their grasp, their families reported that it was like experiencing their death twice—first when they lost the ability to hold together the events of their past, and secondly when they ceased to breathe. That's by way of saying that we live day to day in such a way that "memory" is part of our most intimate self. We are not who we are without it. A second example I ought to bring up because of today's date. How many of us observed a pause in our day or prayed for a moment for an end to terror, violence, and war today? That's recollection of the horror of 9/11 not for its own sake but for our present and our future.

So, in the first half of the lecture we built a framework for desire. If we are what we love, then we need to be able to describe those loves. Memory is going to add an *identity* to desire, and this is where we are going to shift to begin to speak about God, and not in an abstract way, but in a very concrete way.

You see we have been remembering in one sense, all the way along this night. We were remembering the description of human desire in the Garden of Eden, and then the temptation of Christ in the desert, and then how to pray and fast and give alms. We were remembering not merely to create this chart we have had up for the last few minutes, but also to see if the claim that Christ was making about desire might give words to our reality. That sort of remembering, which any of you who have attended a Catholic Mass will have witnessed, is not the recollection of simple facts to be laid out on timeline. That's a different project. No when we remember in this way we participate in that very thing. That's why attending a Jewish seder meal is about more than consistently eating bitter herbs for three millennia. It is about participating in the same freedom which God gave to his people in the Exodus. Or, in the case of Catholic Mass, the Eucharistic narrative of the last supper is not a historical recreation of the upper room in Jerusalem, but a present participation in the very same event on account of the substantial presence of the very same God.

So, I would like to use what are, in my estimation, two of the most important examples of this sort of remembering. I am drawing these from ancient homilies, specifically those of St. Augustine, who spent much of his life thinking through memory and desire. In both cases, the memory is about Jesus Christ. What we get from each of these examples—and in a different way in each—is what the process of remembering them does to us, for our lives, and our time.

[Slide 7] The first one is this. The scene is calvary hill outside the walls of Jerusalem. When Jesus dies on the cross, he does something very odd. He does not do a lot of talking, but has a few last words. And one of the most important of those is a quote. From up on the cross, Jesus prays: “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” First of all, he’s remembering. He is not delivering a newly crafted line of his own to be quoted for all time. No he is remembering the Psalms, and quoting the first line of prayer that he would have known from praying with his own scriptural upbringing. There, at the hour of his death, there was poetry on his lips. But what an odd thing to remember? If Christianity is right and Jesus was fully human and fully God, then that line poses some really big problems. At that point on the cross, he didn’t stop being God—the Word who had created the universe in the beginning and taken up human flesh from Mary. So, if Jesus is still God, how could he ask God why have you abandoned me? It would be like the divine aspect of Jesus and the human side were chattering among themselves. Or, as UP theologian Michael Cameron has so perfectly put it, it could be like “divine ventriloquism”—divinity using humanity like a cheap puppet.

And this is where St. Augustine is incredibly helpful. For you see, when Christ cries out on Good Friday in abandonment and commends his spirit to God, he has never stopped being the creator of the universe. But that day we see he has taken up more than our skin—he’s taken up our life, our voice, and our death. He cries out loud in a *human* voice the sound of *human* agony at is very worst. And at that lowest moment, suffering, innocent, doomed to die, it is not a voice from heaven that speaks, but the voice of God-made-**man**. And Augustine figured out that a most marvelous exchange happens. Christ—who suffers unjustly—speaks in our flesh, in our words, so that we might speak in his. Suffering doesn’t disappear in our world—goodness no—we’ve all seen the news through the summer. But, no longer will the suffering of sinners—great or small, student or professor, brother or sister—ever be undergone alone. We will cry out in him, be silent in him, when we suffer it will be in him, and when we die and breathe our last...yes...that too will be in him. *In that moment the cross became hope*. But, such closeness of our human with his divine could not even be conceivable unless...we remember. We remember Christ’s death not to hear a story, but to listen to him speak in our flesh—listen to him speak in us, uncomfortable though his words of agony may be. We remember so that we might then practice speaking in him: that whenever we might need to cry out “my God my God why have you forsaken me?” it will be because our savior speaks and hears our cry with us.

And this is where the identity shift begins to take place when we remember how Christ not only took up our flesh and our voices, but did so to teach us how to learn to speak. What happens is we have to think—again with Augustine—one step further. If Christ took up our flesh and our voice, he certainly didn’t put it down again, even after rising from the dead and ascending into heaven.

Now for example number two. **[Slide 8]** Not quite a decade later, Augustine worked through another version of the same question of memory. In the first, answering “my God, my God why have you forsaken **me**?” helped him knit humans and Christ so closely that when we speak in him we are being transfigured by him. The second part, however, was when he heard the same Christ say, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting **me**?” Again, the “me” brings up a couple big questions with serious consequences.

The story will be familiar to many of you. A Pharisee named Saul is not happy about this new group of followers of Christ currently referring to themselves as “The Way.” He binds them in chains only to haul

them before religious magistrates. And somewhere between Jerusalem and Damascus to the north, he is blinded by light and hears this most amazing question. A voice says, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” He asks the voice to identify itself and Jesus says that it is him. Augustine quickly realized that if we think very hard about this we have got a big problem. Augustine asks why it might have been that Christ—who had ascended to heaven, it is not like Saul was hurting him—why Christ did not say why are you persecuting “my saints,” or “my servants,” “my people” or “my holy ones,” but rather “why are you persecuting me?” Augustine’s conclusion is that when the voice of Christ spoke to Saul it had been saying the equivalent of ““Why attack my very body...my limbs?”” Augustine makes this point very vividly. Paul’s conversion is like the tongue of a body speaking in the name of the foot. When one’s foot is trampled in a crowd, the tongue cries out “You are treading on me!” not “You are treading on my foot.” The tongue was not crushed; the foot does not speak. Nonetheless, the unity of tongue and foot within the body allows the tongue to say “me” for both.

What Augustine did with this was remarkable and unique in the Christian tradition. First, Christ took up the human cry on the cross and transfigured it...and made it his own. But secondly, that did not end with the resurrection and ascension. That cry stayed his own such that he expressed it every time that one of his members was hurt or persecuted, prayed, or was silent; there was still a taking up of the cry of the members. Christ the head and the rest of his body form one, **whole** Christ. And inasmuch as you and I or any other member of Christ speaks or prays or **desires** or acts—in him—we can be assured we are being drawn along and transfigured by the head of this body. We are becoming ever more who we are. Don’t miss this: We are becoming Christ.

This was not scandalous to people in the North of Africa 1600 years ago, but terribly exciting. We remember Christ in order to **become** him. It gives a whole new meaning to why and how we bother remembering at all. We remember Christ sacramentally by eating his body and drinking his blood. Augustine’s way of preaching that: “be who you are, become who you receive.” We remember Christ in the poor. Augustine made his congregation really worried when he suggested that how they store up *riches in heaven was to invest their wealth in the only safe place: Christ. In other words, give it to the poor.* Tough sermon, but we don’t become Christ alone, but together in this system. And, most importantly, we remember Christ in mercy. When a notorious sinner came back to church one day, Augustine said to his congregants:

We must therefore commend him to your eyes and your hearts. With your hearts, love the person you see; with your eyes, take care of him. Look at him, make sure you will know him again, and wherever he goes, point him out to our brothers and sisters who are not here today. This watchfulness is a mercy...make yourselves his guardians.²

This is a very active way of remembering, because we don’t do it alone. We do it as Christ—as his very body. It is a way of recalling that moves us beyond ourselves moment after moment such that we might say with Augustine: “I could not have seen it myself if I had not seen it through the eyes of Christ, if indeed, I had not been in him.” These eyes are not to be taken and adapted at will by an individual who wishes to put them on as one might spectacles. Rather, by being a member of the body, one learns to speak, see, smell, taste, and understand in ways that are characteristic of that body. One sees neighbors in need, one learns to speak the Word that leads beyond words, and one is transfigured, prayer by prayer into Christ.

Some of my very dear non-religious friends will occasionally wonder why I continue to remember things all the time. I remember Christ at the Mass every day. I encourage people to remember their sins in a new way in Christ in confession. It is all an ongoing remembering. But it has never been about the past.

² *En Ps* 61.23.

For Christians, it is all about becoming who we really are in such a way that Christ draws us ever more closely to himself and in the process to each other.

This is not the rosy work of a cure all, but the gritty, ongoing, two steps forward and one step back on a good day way of living Christian life. It-- at long last, and you have labored hard with me tonight—it gets us to *searching* for God in our desire and our memory. For all too often, the search for God is undertaken alone, sitting in a dark room by and thinking really really hard about omniscient, omnipotent, all-loving, and all-merciful being. We do not have a direct memory of these properties, of a God of properties; and it is very hard to have much of a tangible desire for such a God.

Christ relieves us of that in a serious way. Our focus is not on the mist but on the real material of our lives. He had desires, that we might desire in him. He spoke in our words that we might speak in his. He became human in order that we humans might become divine. By remembering, we undergo a process of letting our God transfigure us day after day after day. And in being drawn closer to God, we find ourselves ever more aware of each other. That's right—aware of our desires and remembering Christ—as we get closer to heaven we realize how much we are stuck with each other!

In a moment of wonderful clarity about desire and memory, St. Augustine writes about what it means to discover recalling one's desires in Christ. It didn't mean that he, the saint who had “prayed Lord make me chaste but not yet,” had forgotten his sins. No, it was exactly the opposite. His own unintegrated desires made him want to run out to be alone, but his very remembering Christ with others is what holds him back. Look at these few lines of his moment on the edge: **[Slide 9]**

Filled with terror by my sins and my load of misery I had been turning over in my mind a plan to flee into solitude, but you forbade me, and strengthened me by your words. ‘To this end Christ died for all,’ you reminded me, ‘that they who are alive may live not for themselves, but for him who died for them.’

See, then, Lord: I cast my care upon you (Ps 54:23)
that I may live, and I will contemplate the wonders you have revealed (Ps 118:17-18).
You know how foolish and weak I am: (Ps 68:6)
teach me and heal me (Ps 24:5; 6:3).
Your only son, in whom are hidden all treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3)
has redeemed me by his blood (Rev 5:9)
Let the proud not disparage me (Ps 118:22),
for I am mindful of my ransom.
I eat it, I drink it, I dispense it to others,
and as a poor man I long to be filled with it
among those who are fed and feasted (Ps. 61:5).
And then do those who seek him praise the Lord (Ps 21:27).³

What was the temptation for him to run out and be alone, lands him right back in communion. He is being taught and healed by eating, drinking and dispensing to others—as a poor man—the price of his redemption. To face his desire and find his God he ended up recommitting himself to all those around him. The search was not a solitary journey, but the collected action of praise.

I want to close tonight with a twentieth century, Augustinian theologian's description of heaven, or the end of the search. Because I don't think we ponder heaven, or finding what we've been searching for, often enough. It certainly isn't a place where each of us gets a fluffy cloud to ourselves. No, listen to this: **[Slide 10]**

³ Conf 10.43.

“The redeemed are not simply adjacent to each other in heaven. Rather, in their being together as the one Christ, they are heaven.”⁴

At long last, by our remembering, we will have become what we love, and not on our own. **[Slide 11]**

I suppose there will be a time in all of our lives when someone—in some fashion—asks us a pointed question: “Are you for real?” As Holy Cross Fr. John Dunne reminds us: “man does not live” and cannot answer that question “by self alone.” We might add that neither will we be redeemed or find the God whom we seek by self alone. No, if we are fully human, fully desiring, we will remember as the daily task of becoming fully divine. Then, when one of us is asked the pointed question, “are you for real?” we will be able to answer it fully and finally in Christ as we say, “yes, *we* are.”

⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, trans. A. Nichols (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 238.