



Saints – A Stone-Throwing Saint

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Psalm 69: 1–9 John 3: 1–8

The Christian movement was born into a world in which a great weight of social expectation bore down on the work of procreation. Lifespans were low, child mortality high, and birth dangerous for mothers. Today we can scarcely imagine the pressures high infant mortality placed on daily life in the first Christian centuries. Girls were drafted in their early teens for the task of begetting and raising healthy, legitimate heirs. Each would need to bear an average of five children to avoid population decline.

As a bishop in the north African town of Carthage, Augustine grappled with many of the fraught pastoral problems associated childbirth and childhood. Often these came to him through letters from parents asking him to explain how a Christian should understand its more difficult passages. Sometime around the year 412 CE he decided the time had come to pull this pastoral guidance together. He penned a compendium of answers to commonly asked questions called, awkwardly to our ears, 'On the merits and forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants'.

The novelty of Augustine's interest in questions of infant mortality, the status of deformed new-borns or the moral status of the victim of rape is easily overlooked today. The problems of women and slaves had never been seen as seemly topics for discussion by the literate men who ruled the ancient world. Though educated Greeks and Romans might sometimes wax eloquent about marital concord, they studiously ignored the griefs, pains and illnesses that came with marriage and childbirth. Only when Christians began to praise virginity as superior to the married state did people first speak in public of the physical realities of the married state for women; the dangers of childbirth, the pain of nursing a child, or the shame associated with infertility. It would be stretching the truth to suggest that Augustine saw things from a woman's perspective. But he did see women and their problems. In his world, disability was one of those problems.

Ancient people were exposed almost daily to the birth and death of humans and animals alike. They took it as obvious that humans and animals share a fleshly nature. The moment in human development when babies stand upright and begin to speak became highly symbolically important. The gesture proved that merely animal life was being lifted from the four-footed gait of animals by the powers distinctive of human beings alone, the capacity for abstract rationality and language. By implication, something must have gone drastically wrong if a particular human being never surpassed the mental capacity of brute animals. In practice those who did not reach this level of rationality were condemned to death by exposure, benign neglect, or exploitation along with other fantastic animals, as spectacles for paying customers.

Given this cultural context, we can begin to appreciate the counterintuitive nature of one person Augustine labelled a saint. This man was of the class at the time labelled '*Moriones*' in Greek, '*idiotus*' in Latin; in English, 'fools'. Augustine writes:

There was once a certain person of this class who was so Christian, that although he was patient to the degree of strange folly with any amount of injury to himself, he was utterly impatient of any insult to the name of Christ or to the religion with which he was imbued. Whenever his gay and clever audience proceeded to blaspheme the sacred name, as they sometimes would in order to provoke his patience, he could never refrain from pelting them with stones; and on these occasions he would show no favour even to persons of rank.

Augustine takes it as self-evident that a person who so zealously loves Jesus could be less than human. Such lives, he continues, God has

brought into existence in order that those who are able should understand that God's grace and the Spirit 'blows where it listeth,' and does not pass over any kind of capacity in the sons of mercy...so that 'he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord'.

Augustine is forced to conclude that such people are receiving with gratitude good, if surprising, forms of life he labels 'strange vocations'. This is no rejection of the sort of descriptions of medical function with which we are so familiar. He admits that in terms of so-called 'normal' function people can appropriately be called deficient, sick, or impaired. But he insists that such descriptions say very little about what it means to be human. Human life is severely misunderstood when reduced to the dimensions of a medical or psychological diagnosis.

It is almost certain that Augustine invoked our unnamed stone-throwing saint in the sermons he preached almost daily in the cathedral in Carthage. The story fit too neatly with several of his recurrent points of emphasis. We know from the sermons that have come down to us that he was not above the common pastor's frustration at not seeing more saintliness among his congregants. His description of our saint also fit neatly with his recurrent tendency to contrast outer physical beauty with the inner beauty of virtue favoured by the Neoplatonic philosophers who so influenced him.

Yet the story leaves us today with unresolved questions. What virtue, for instance, are we to take this saint to exemplify? Augustine's conclusion is unambiguous: it is not intelligence or eloquence that matters in the Christian life, but zeal in following Christ. In his public defence of the honour of the name of Jesus this man reveals himself to be a true saint. He might have a 'strange vocation', but it is divinely given, and Holy Spirit inspired.

We are jarred by this assessment, having been so deeply shaped by modern medical sensibilities. It comes more naturally to us to view such behaviour as embarrassing and pitiful, a worrying symptom of intellectual deficiency or mental illness. This is behaviour calling for medical, if not police intervention, and probably reveals a lack of capacity for taking moral responsibility. Where we see illness and disability, Augustine sees a saint. He refuses to let a lack of raw intelligence rob anyone of moral agency, and so the capacity for saintliness.

The violence of the story similarly unsettles us. To public intellectuals like Richard Dawkins and Peter Sloterdijk, it is all too fitting for a story about religious zeal to culminate in a hail of stones. Zeal is the basic component of radicalization, they insist, and radicalism the sworn opponent of modern secular tolerance. As Tallal Asad has often observed, modern liberal societies make one demand on believers of any and all religions: to 'take their beliefs lightly'.

There is more than a grain of truth in the secularists' fear of religious zeal metastasizing into violence. Yet the biblical narrative hints that this warning cannot be the whole story. 'Zeal for your house consumes me' our psalm for today ended. To the ears of the gospel writers this sounded like a prophetic prefiguration of Jesus' ministry.

Augustine's saint takes the second command of the Decalogue, to reverence God's name, with a literalness Christians today find hard to imagine. In calling him a saint Augustine insists, to the contrary, that he is exemplary at precisely this point. Jesus too taught Christians a prayer that likewise stretches contemporary Christian imagination. In praying 'hallowed be thy name' Christians commit themselves to observe the Decalogue's second command. The insight is at least a challenge to academic theologians today, who are rarely accused of zealously hallowing Christ's name.

It is likewise a challenge to the more widespread pity of the disabled. Augustine's story suggests that the people we today label disabled may, in God's providence, have things to teach us about being Christian that we could never have anticipated. Maybe the first lesson is to reveal that the ways we label and categorize people, especially those with learning difficulties or mental illnesses, can rob them of their moral agency.

Or perhaps it is our stone-throwing saint's ability to see past social rank that remains his most important witness today. The biblical narratives often highlight how fearing God alone deflates the morally paralyzing fear of men and their power and apparent moral right. True, such zealous fear must be guarded against lapsing into violence. At the same time, such holy fear engenders a courage that dares to speak out against the noble lies that the powerful promulgate to stabilize the status quo. To dare the personal risk of speaking out against the patent injustice that benefits the powerful is unthinkable without zeal.

Or maybe, just maybe, Augustine has simply misread the life of someone who is clearly violent and mentally ill. Such is the gift of the saints: Theirs are lives lived beyond our certainties, at an odd slant that demands we look again. And sometimes, when we stop to attend to them, inclining our heads to get a better view, the whole world begins to look just that little bit differently.

The description of the gender dynamics of the first Christian centuries is drawn from Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, chapter one.

Quotations of 'On the merits and forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants' come from chapter 32, and draw on Philip Schaff's translation, slightly modified for modern readers. The passage is reprinted in Brian Brock and John Swinton eds. *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, pages 78–79.

The Tallal Assad quotation comes from *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, the critique of Zeal from Peter Sloterdijk *God's Zeal: The Battle of the Three Monotheisms*.