



Review of Jonathan D. Ryan, *Love Does Not Seek Its Own: Augustine, Economic Division, and the Formation of a Common Life*, T&T Clark, 2021, 272 pp.

Wilco de Vries

Duke University Divinity School

The wound out of which *Love Does Not Seek Its Own* was born is increasing economic inequality. In New Zealand, where Jonathan D. Ryan is a Presbyterian minister, the income gap between rich and poor has widened faster than in any other developed country. Concerned with the needs of the poor, Ryan's leading questions in his timely book are "what does it mean to be the church amidst an economically divided society? And how does God seek to form such a church?" In answering those questions, he turns to Augustine's sermons and monastic instructions to see what we can gain from Augustine's pastoral insights.

According to Ryan, Augustine helps us become aware that economic division is not purely the result of financial institutions and paradigms but also results from internal dispositions such as greed, envy, and pride. To be a church that addresses economic inequality, we need to be internally transformed. We find the central theme of Ryan's argument in Augustine's monastic rule:

"For when it is written of *love* that it *does not seek its own* (1 Corinthians 13:5), it means that it puts the common good before its own and not personal advantage before the common good. Thus the more you are concerned about the common good rather than your own, the more progress you will know that you have made" (*Praeceptum* 5.2).

Ryan argues that the rule's movement from private self-interest toward common love is fundamental to Augustine's pastoral care and "to the church's formation and identity amidst contemporary contexts of economic inequality" (19). In seven chapters, structured around seven instructions of Augustine's monastic rule, Ryan analyzes how the theme of each chapter contributes to the formation of love of God and neighbor in the church's communal life. In analyzing Augustine's sermons and monastic rule, Ryan does not give a historical account of the relationship between these works. Instead, he adopts an intertextual approach to understand better the rule and the sermons (24-5).

In what follows, I briefly summarize each chapter's main point and afterward provide an overall evaluation of Ryan's argument.

In the first chapter, Ryan deals with the commandments to love God and neighbor, the overarching framework of Augustine's ethics and vision for community life. Ryan thoroughly discusses Augustine's conviction that we must love God to love our neighbor properly. He concludes that Christian formation is, first and foremost, about learning to love rightly. In the second chapter, he zooms in on how, for Augustine, sharing should be a response to God's work to make the church one in heart and soul (Acts 4:35). Augustine emphasizes the relationship between the rich and the poor because wealth can lead to disconnection, as the parable of the rich man and poor Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) illustrates.

The third chapter focuses on avarice, which Ryan defines as a disordered seeking of one's own good apart from God and neighbor. Seen in this light, we can even be greedy for our own property because we keep for ourselves what we do not really need while the poor are starving. Ryan points out that, for Augustine, "the act of giving is not a diminishment of 'our' property, nor a demonstration of 'our' benevolence, but rather the rightful distribution of God's gifts" (98). Because God is humanity's common good, the one who loves God should also, like God, care for others. We should not cling to our private possessions, which are God's gifts anyway, but distribute them according to need. While Augustine's monastic community held all property in common, Augustine does not claim that other Christians could not possess private property. In his preaching, he simply tries to make listeners (and later readers) aware of two questions: "What do you really need? And what does your neighbor need?"

Chapter four deals with greed and envy for someone else's good. Augustine points out that to acquire the freedom to give to our poor neighbor, we must not envy our wealthy neighbor. Because when we aspire to become more prosperous than other people, we forget the poor. Pride is another threat to the common life, as Ryan points out in chapter five. In giving to the poor, pride can reassert the social differentiation between the giver and the receiver. In pointing to Christ's humility—Christ became poor to make us rich—and the reality that existence and redemption are gifts, Augustine creates a discourse in which the giver cannot boast about his giving. Both giver and receiver are held in the hands of the Giver and are, therefore, equal.

In chapters six and seven, Ryan further develops the themes of Christ's humility and grace. He describes in chapter six how Augustine resisted corruption because he wanted to model his ministry as a bishop after Christ who searched for the common good, not the good of some privileged group of individuals. In chapter seven, Ryan explores in more detail how the Christian community should understand its efforts to love in an economically unequal society. He concludes that an emphasis on grace prevents pride and inspires doing good to others.

In the conclusion, Ryan recaps his argument and provides suggestions on how to live a common life based on Augustine's insights. While the directions Ryan provides are helpful, they remain somewhat abstract because they lack a concrete case study. I mean that Ryan offers examples of neighborhood gardens, community art spaces, and community afternoon

gatherings but never analyzes these examples in detail. He gives these examples and almost immediately moves on. Suppose he had introduced in chapter one the case study of a church wanting to help the poor but failing to do so because of all the ills Augustine already mentioned in the monastic rules and the sermons. In that case, Ryan could have made Augustine's insights more practical and relevant in his conclusion. Now, we are left to admire Augustine's wisdom, but I am still slightly uncertain of how to practice his wisdom in a world where financial powers seem to dictate everything.

And here is my other question for Ryan. While I understand he does not engage economic literature (since he already has enough on his hands with Augustine and the ubiquitous secondary literature on the bishop of Hippo), I wonder whether it is possible to discuss economic inequality without analyzing financial institutions and practices. Ryan's analysis runs the risk that economic inequality becomes too much of an issue of the heart. For Augustine, pride founded the earthly city, but his writings reveal that there is also more to evil than the sinful human heart.

In advancing our understanding of Augustine's pastoral theology and ministry, Ryan successfully contributes to Augustinian scholarship. His analysis helpfully illuminates the structural parallels between the monastic rule and the sermons. While Augustine does not expect laypeople to conform to the monastic lifestyle of possessing all things in common, the structural parallels Ryan discovers between the rule and the sermons underscore Augustine's expectation that every Christian should be concerned with the public good—that good in which both the self and the neighbor find a rightful place.