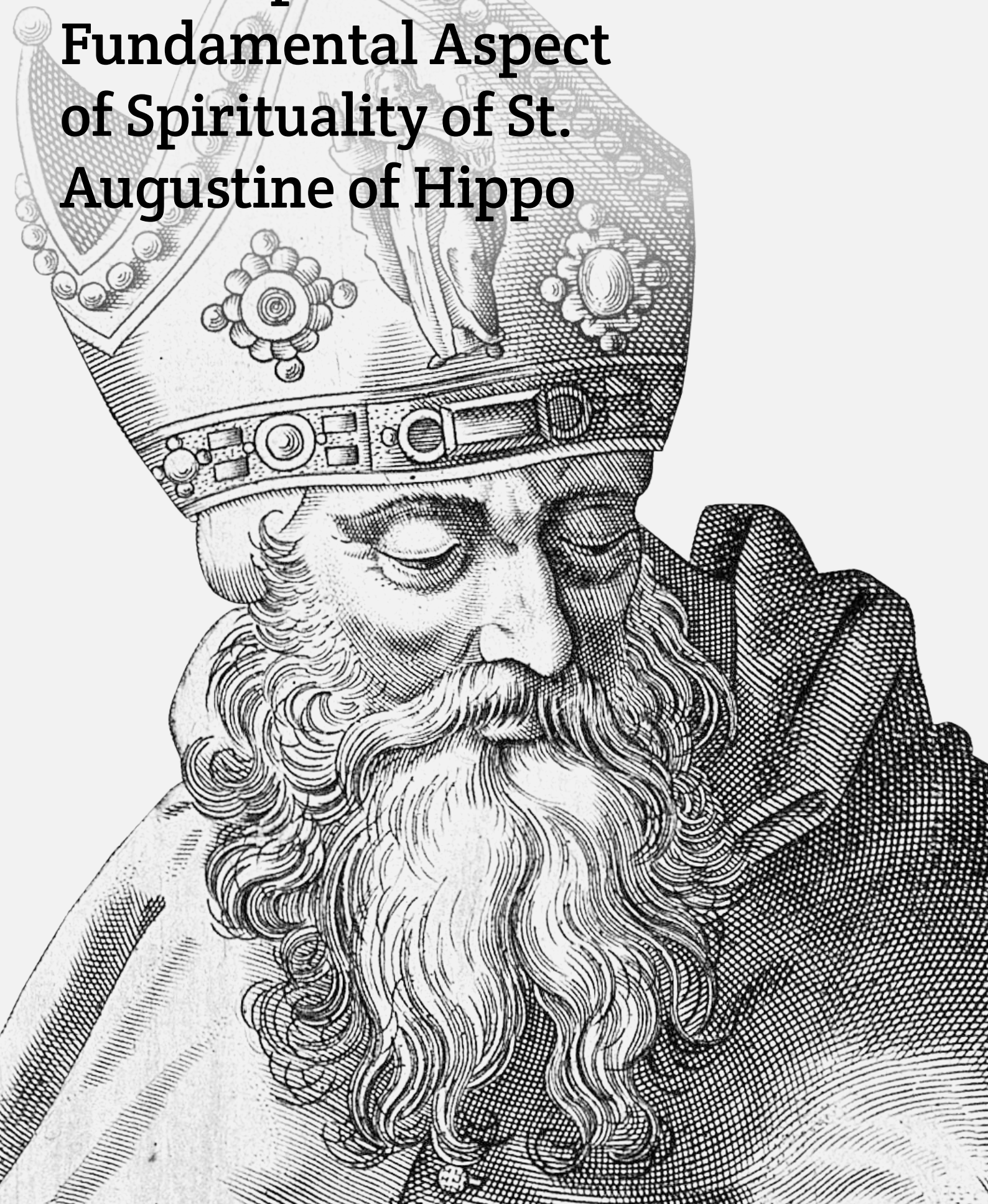


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# Contemplative in Action: Fundamental Aspect of Spirituality of St. Augustine of Hippo





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**The history of Christian spirituality emphasizes the difference between the active and contemplative life. This has caused a problematic division between spirituality and practice of the Christian Church. Augustine of Hippo was among the first theologians who addressed this issue. The study explores Augustine's answer to this issue based on textual research of the Augustinian corpus and presents it as an early Christian symbiosis of contemplation in action that has not yet been explored in the history of spirituality.**

## 1 Introduction

When it comes to the life of early Christian bishop and theologian Augustine of Hippo (354–430) we know that after his baptism in 387 he sold his father's property and gave the money to the poor (Augustinus 1904, 12–13). He rented a house in Cassiacum with his friends, where they implemented a monastic way of life, in peace and ascetism and reflected over religion and philosophy, just as he had desired for a long time: *"Together we were, together we lived in sacred friendship, looking for some place where we could engage more usefully at your service."* (Augustinus 1981, 137). This community was not monastic in the literal sense of the word; it was partly monastic and partly aimed at study – a life in solitude interwoven with philosophical debates: *"We would start our dispute only at sunset, after spending the whole day with provincial matters and mainly with explanation of the first book by Vergilius."* (Augustinus 1982, 12). Augustine understood renunciation of the world and adhesion to a monastic way of life as keeping aside from active life associated with acceptance of public Church office. God's calling, however, drew him to public service for the Church in the apostolic mission as a bishop of Hippo Regius. Augustine accepted the result of the election, although he saw it as a heavy burden (*episcopatus sarcina*) until the end of his life. It seems that the main reason for this acceptance was his perception of the intervention of divine providence and grace into human life. A lecture on Augustine's works reminds us that he lived his whole life as a constant battle between his desire to live in contemplation and study the Word of God on the one hand and duties emerging from his priestly and episcopal consecration on the other hand. The post-Augustinian tradition accepted the existence of two separate forms of life in the Church as a given fact and developed further reflections over both without trying to analyze the author's thinking in a holistic way.

Thus, we have a well-documented division between spirituality and practice of the Church. Therefore, we will start our study with an analysis of two main lines of the author's spirituality, i.e., the relation between action and contemplation, the separate existence of which can be documented by his texts. Subsequently, we will point to the existence of texts that prove that we are talking about two mutually complementary styles of Christian life, the idea of which stems from Varron's philosophical tradition and biblical texts of the Old and New Testament. Augustine based his reflections on the assumption that there are two different actions of human reason emerging from the unity of the human soul, which – in his opinion – was necessary to put into symbiosis. The aim

of this study is to point to the fact of existence of a unique Augustinian early Christian symbiosis of contemplation in action, which has not yet been explored in the history of Christian spirituality.

The thing is, that although Augustine emphasized the existence of two mutually complementary styles of Christian life, an analysis of his texts shows that he particularly developed his own attitude in the sense that can be characterized as a unique early Christian symbiosis of contemplation in action.

## 2 Methodology

The study of Augustine's works in the context of the history has been influenced by denominational interpretation of his thinking, as well as by putting emphasis on a certain part of his literary corpus. Thus, in this study we approach the Augustinian corpus synchronously, by reading the selected text in its final version as a literary and theological text, because it is not possible to implement a chronological approach to most of Augustine's texts, mainly his sermons. We proceed with the use of the hermeneutical method of "emerging topics," which enables us to avoid a scholastic approach, within which the texts were approached with spiritual-theological thoughts prepared in advance and the aim was to find their confirmation in the text. Our method is based on a holistic and continuous reading of the texts, which gradually underlined certain frequently appearing thoughts and themes and thus confirmed their importance. Texts, or more precisely first-person reports, are the main source of our knowledge on spirituality as Martin Dojčár points out (2017, 46). The benefit of this method lies in the fact that the text itself marks certain topics as crucial, without the reader trying to push in his own agenda (Borgomeo 1972, 16–17). We have reduced secondary literary sources to a minimum, as we prefer the analysis of original texts in their specific and contextual perception.

## 3 Augustine's Philosophical and Biblical Sources

Augustine's thinking was influenced by the intellectual reflections of his predecessors – pagan philosophers – and was subsequently enriched by texts of the Bible. He often uses allegories (Nemec 2021, 51). In the Book 19 of *The City of God*, Augustine analyzes this inherited intellectual wealth handed over to him by the writing *De philosophia* written by philosopher Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BC), fragments of whose opus have only been preserved in the quoted work

by Augustine. He describes three styles of life: *“In three ways of life, the first one consisting of contemplation and the search for the truth, although not idle; the second one filled by worries about human matters; the third one where both ways are in balance.”* (Augustinus 1955, 660).

He discovered the first two ways in the images of biblical figures. The CAG Online Database of Augustine’s texts in their Latin version shows that he found three pairs of different figures in the Bible which served as the models for his thinking. There are two sisters, Martha and Mary, from The New Testament described in the Gospel of John (Bonnardière 1986, 411–425); in The Old Testament he found two women, Leah and Rachel, both wives of the patriarch Jacob (Augustinus 1891, 648–653) and from the Gospel of John he took the New Testament figures of the apostles Peter and John (Augustinus 1954a, 680–687).

According to Augustine, the figures of Mary, Rachel and John represented life dedicated to religious contemplation and prayer or intellectual thinking, while Martha, Leah and Peter represented active life dedicated to deeds of mercy for the sake of people in need. We can also say that active life is connected to a paradigm of temporal existence, while the second way of life implies peace and stability of eternal life to which we are oriented.

It is obvious that Augustine sensed real tension between the active life and the contemplative way of life. There is a complementary relation between them, which – as it seems – represented the third way of life mentioned by pagan thinker Terentius Varro, quoted above. Hence, the active life is an inevitable part of a life directed towards contemplation, both on earth and in future life. In his sermons, Augustine regularly encouraged almsgiving, the practice of which purifies the sinful soul of a person: *“Practice mercy, practice almsgiving, fasting, prayers. Through them the hearts are purified of daily sins which would not tear souls if there was no human fragility.”* (Augustinus 1953, 141). It is necessary for man to share wealth with the poor to save his soul (Augustinus 1931, 203):

*If you love wealth, you do not want to lose it, because it will die with you wherever you go. Here, my advice regarding your wealth. Do you love it? Thereby send it where you can follow it. Avoid loving it in this earthly world, because you risk losing it while you are here or leaving it behind when you die. There, I have for you advice: I did not say you would have to destroy it but to make better use of it. Do you want to gather wealth? I am not telling you not to, but I advise where you should gather it. I am not the one who forbids, but the one who gives advice. So where*

*should you gather it? ‘Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor decay destroys’ (Mt 6:20).*

Serving those who are in need is nothing but the means of purification of the soul to enable it to contemplate God. Both ways of life are necessary, and it is crucial that neither of them interferes with the goodness of the other way of life but complements it, thus creating the third way of life – *contemplation in action*.

This is why Augustine tried to harmonize both ways in his search for a Christian ideal of love that consists of love for God and love for our neighbor, which according to Christ are two principal parts of the main commandment: *“driven by one and the same love, we love God and our neighbor: if we love God for the sake of God and neighbor also for the sake of God”* (Augustinus 2001, 286). In the Book 19 of *The City of God*, Augustine (1955, 686) reminds us that each of these ways of life may lead to salvation:

*It depends on what he does out of love for the truth and what out of duty for love. Nobody should be overly contemplative and neglect in his peace the benefit of his neighbor. And nobody should be overly active and neglect the contemplation of God... Thus, love for the truth searches for sacred peace and perceives rightful activity as a duty of love for neighbor. If nobody imposes this heavy burden upon us, it is desired to reflect on the truth. And if we have this burden laid on our shoulders, we ought to accept it out of duty to love our neighbor.*

And although the contemplative way of life is better: *“Mary has chosen the better part”* (Lk 10:42). Jacob indeed married Leah, who represented the active life, but served other years to also get Rachel who symbolized contemplation (Gn 29). This cannot mean that the apostolic action would be bad. It only means that it should lead to something more complete (Augustinus 1865, 615). Hence, we should adopt active way of life when the Church reminds us of our talent; however, even during our striving we should not neglect the magic of contemplation.

## 4 The Anthropological Base of Augustine Thinking

Augustine’s perception of the relation between action and contemplation is based on his view of man and human nature as an essential unity of soul and body that represents the inner and outer part of a person. The human soul is created, not born, and as such it is obliged within its essence

and natural dynamism to keep its sight oriented towards God: *“Reason is the eye of the soul, and the ability to see correctly is a virtue. Seeing God is the ultimate aim of looking, not because there would not be anything else behind him, but because there is nothing more noble to which human soul could pay attention.”* (Augustinus 1986a, 21).

However, because of being united with the body, the soul must active orientation to fulfil the requirements of physical existence. This is why, according to Augustine, action and contemplation are related to various activities of the human intellect which produce various kinds of knowledge: *“in the human soul there is a certain rational marriage between contemplative reason and active reason, without a disruptive impact of their respective functions on the unity of the soul, without damaging the impact of the distinction of their roles on the unity of the soul”* (Augustinus 2001, 373).

Because knowledge is associated with being, these intellectual operations direct the soul towards various degrees of reality. In this sense, Augustine does not separate but distinguishes action from contemplation from a scholarly point of view (by intellectual knowledge of outer things and wisdom), which means intellectual knowledge of the highest eternal ideas, drawing attention to the internal orientation of the first towards the second (Augustinus 2001, 379).

According to Augustine (1986b, 224), contemplation is the true highlight of the life of a sage and the way to obtain true knowledge of changeless and immaterial reality: *“it searches for a refuge in God, contemplation of the truth itself, which represents an immense, noble reward for the soul of a sage.”* Following the path commanded by God, enlightened by His grace, culminates in the supreme Creator and sovereign principle of all things. This is when man in the highest act of contemplation realizes the vanity and contingency of everything that has been created (Lichner and Hamarová 2021, 48–53). Contemplation, as perfect knowledge, represents the answer to the effort of a man aimed at the pursuit of happiness (Augustinus 1986b, 33). Rational thinking brings the means to get to know visible, created things, which are substantially contingent and represent only the image of true being that is incorporeal, supratemporal and transcending space. Augustine (2001, 379) quotes from apostle Paul’s First Letter to Corinthians (12:8): *“To one is given through the Spirit the expression of wisdom; to another the expression of knowledge according to the same Spirit,”* and this quotation allows him to distinguish *“intellectual knowledge of eternal things from rational knowledge of temporal things”*. In this context, scholarly knowledge represents a link between the experience of the senses that make us feel physical nat-

uralness and intellectual understanding of eternal truths. Activity provides the means of contemplation, but only when it contributes to the growth of wisdom through the unveiling of universal laws and numeric principles that rule nature: *“Desire for knowledge is inherent to reason, because knowledge substantiates material subjects perceived by the physical senses, and its reasonable use helps this knowledge relate to the ultimate goal – sovereign goodness; this knowledge, however, is used in the wrong way if it remains there, rejoices there and if illusory bliss is sought there.”* (Augustinus 2001, 371). As Augustine affirms, every action can have both positive and negative connotations.

## 5 Right and Wrong Cognition

Augustine believes that active cognition is used correctly when it does not remain focused on itself as the ultimate goal but proceeds on its way towards a higher eternal order. Contemplation is thus the conclusion of partial moral decisions supported by virtues (Augustinus 1986a, 22). It is true that action may result in fault on a moral level by leading the soul towards excessive attachment to earthly goods and pushing it away from its fundamental orientation. Instead of searching for the ultimate good for all, the soul keeps everything to itself, creating the absoluteness based on contingent individual needs and desires. This is why Augustine described the original sin of Adam as a sin of pride, as an excessive love for action that captures the soul in the net of insignificant and temporal matters (Augustinus 2017, 86): *“A man moves away from God as much as his heart is proud, and rushes into the abyss. In contrast, a humble heart will compel God bow down to him and be close to him.”* (Augustinus 1956, 1317). Similarly, the sin of excessive curiosity – a concupiscence of the eyes – has its roots in a disordered desire to get to know physical and temporal images (Augustinus 1992, 25):

*It moves away from God not regarding place, but through love and craving for lower things than himself, filling his heart with imprudence and misery. He returns to God through love, which he does not use to get even with Him, but to subordinate. The sooner and more willingly he does it, the sooner he will be blessed, subordinate and free under His reign. This is why he needs to be aware of being a creation, for he must believe that his Creator remains inviolable and unchangeable by the nature of truth and wisdom, and he must confess that he can fall into the abyss of imprudence and deceit because of mistakes he tries to avoid. But again, he must prevent separation from the love of God that sanctifies and keeps him in the state*

*of blessedness, by the love for other creation, i.e., love for this world perceptible by the senses.*

This is why Augustine writes: “God gave people temporary goods necessary to obtain peace under one condition – that they will use them properly to obtain bigger goods: eternal peace and appropriate beauty and glory in eternal life. Those who misuse it will not obtain what is eternal and will lose what is temporary.” (Augustinus 1955, 679).

## 6 Contemplation and Mystical Experience

The opening words of Augustine’s biography *Confessiones* clearly indicate that the starting point and meaning of human existence is to be with God, who created us, and to take part in His divine life; only then will we see Him face to face (Karfíková 1992, 24–25). Therefore, while we are here on Earth, contemplation will only be a temporary glimpse of eternal notions, because these are the intelligible expression of divine truth (Augustinus 1986b, 199). Augustine thus clearly differentiates such an imperfect mode of contemplation from the vision of God, pure and free, reserved for the life to come. Indeed, even in the best case, the soul in the present has only a partial knowledge of true being, mainly because of the necessary attention to the needs of the body. He often describes contemplation in mystical language, as exceptional moments when the soul experiences an intimate and loving union with God (Augustinus 1904, 305):

*It can disturb us, how God’s essence itself can be seen by some even here in Earthly life, since it was said to Moses, ‘no one may see my face and live’ (Ex 33:20). Only in this way may the human mind be torn from this life by divine power to the angelic life, even before it is freed from the body by death, common to all. This is how the one who heard the unutterable words that no man is free to speak was captivated. There his attention was so distracted from the senses of this life that he said he does not know whether he is in the body or out of the body, that is, whether the mind was alienated from this life and transferred to the next life, since this is a stronger ecstasy, and although the union with the body endured, whether the division that is in complete death was fully realized (2 Cor 12:2–4). And so it may be that this is also true, what has been said, that no one can see my face and live. Because it is necessary for the mind to withdraw from this life when it is taken up in the unutterability of that vision.*

It is interesting to note, however, that his descriptions of the mystical connection show a strong rational perspective. When he describes the conversation with his mother Monica just before her death in Ostia, we can see from the description that he is describing the spiritual elevation of the contingent sensory realities towards the grasping of the non-sensual and non-contingent reality (Augustinus 1981, 147–148):

*Our conversation was in this sense, that any pleasure of the bodily senses in any physical beauty is not worthy of being compared with the bliss of the second life; indeed, it is not even worth being mentioned; with an even more fervent ardor of love we rose to it, we ascended by degrees from corporeal creatures up to heaven, from where the sun, moon and stars pour their light down. And we delved still deeper, considered, talked, and admired your works. We entered our own spirit; nay, we ascended above it to reach the land of inexhaustible abundance, where you shepherd Israel in the meadows of eternal truth, where life is Wisdom, who gave life to past things and to future things. It was not created, however, but is always what it was and always will be. These words – ‘was’, ‘will be’ – do not apply to it, because it is eternal, because all that applies to it is that it is; for ‘it was’, ‘it will be’ is not eternal. While we thus spoke and longed for that life, we touched it with the mighty beat of our heart; we sighed, then we left the shackled elements of the spirit and returned to the sound of our voice, where the word begins and ends.*

Therefore, it would be incorrect if we wished to radically separate mysticism from contemplation in Augustine’s thinking, as contemplation is an active human search for God, but God rarely responds by providing a mystical experience (Vašek, Blažčíková, and Nemec 2022, 1). We can thus consider every tiny perception of God during this life as the fulfilment of the spiritual life during our stay here on Earth.

## 7 The Indispensability of Grace

Augustine’s early reflections on the relation between action and contemplation underline the personal effort of an individual in contact with God during contemplation as well as during his actions directed towards a specific person in service. A crucial change occurred in 396, when Augustine was working on his *treatise for Simplician*, with essential thoughts used several years later (397–401) in his autobiographic writing *Confessiones*. We witness a significant change in the understanding of the indispensability of grace in the development of contemplation and action, whether individually

or in their desired symbiosis. Augustine absolutely rejected the neo Platonian and stoic ideals of human self-sufficiency in the process of reaching wisdom, as well as contemplative experience of God. He develops this change of attitude in the battle with Pelagian movement, which emphasized the self-sufficient role of the human spirit in the field of salvation (Lichner 2012, 31–32). The grace of Jesus Christ is not only needed but also indispensable for salvation, and every gift, including looking at God in contemplation and during a mystical experience, every external activity, is thus an undeserved gift of God that is not granted based on previous human merit but based on God's love (Augustinus 1911, 406). Augustine compares the desire for contemplation graven into human soul to the image of a thirsty deer longing for streams of water from the second verse of Psalm 41 (Augustinus 1954b, 460). This is why in one homily he affirms that he as a preacher is only a basket in which the faithful can find the bread of God, emphasizing that God is the one who puts the bread into the basket (Augustinus 1959, 187). An active temporal life of the soul draws its value from being surrounded by the mercy of God's love, which enables it to keep its principal orientation towards contemplation. The soul realizes that the initial impulse, as well as subsequent accompanying during active life – whether reflected externally in the deeds of mercy or moving internally from knowledge to wisdom – as well as completion of the whole process, is an undeserved gift of God's grace given to us through love.

## 8 Conclusion

Augustine never thought about the relation between action and contemplation abstractly. He was confronted with this question his whole life, and he constantly kept trying to put his first and stable preference for the contemplative life in harmony with the number of active duties that resulted from his priestly and later also episcopal life. His thinking was based on the previous pagan philosophy of Varro, the conclusions of which he deepened with biblical texts, as he tried to find a solution. Augustine was convinced that human beings need to search for complementary symbiosis between contemplation and action. Only this way can they avoid egoism as a result of fully lived contemplation, where deeds of love are missing. This, of course, does not mean that monks should try to take over pastoral responsibilities. They ought to wait until the Church invites them to do so. However, an active life in the service of a local Church can be egoistical, as well, under certain circumstances, especially when members of the clergy search for happiness in the pursuit of appreciation instead of in serving others. Early experience

of the monastic form of life in Cassiacum, where prayer was combined and supplemented with thinking and contemplation of the Word of God, remained in Augustine's heart as a deeply unfulfilled desire. A growing sense of responsibility for the temporal needs of his ecclesiastical community and the strengthening emphasis put on deeds of mercy as a basis of Christian behavior helped him find a balance between contemplation and action. This way of thinking can be found in his works as well as his life. His action and thinking were marked by a lifelong search for harmony between these two seemingly different but still complementary aspects of Christian life, the symbiosis of which he found in contemplative activity.

Thanks to the gift of God's mercy, a contemplatively active person realizes the reason and sense of his contingent existence substantially aimed at and for God. He spiritually perceives and finds expressions of this free and undeserved grace that surrounds his whole life, thus enabling him to walk spiritually from the created and contingent towards the uncreated in a unique early Christian symbiosis of contemplation in action. The study of primary sources has revealed that Augustine saw the incarnation as a life principle of any Christian who is contemplative in action. The customary division into an active and contemplative life is therefore an artificial division that does not correspond with Christian reality. The results of our research invite us to a reinterpretation of the fundamental movements in the history of spirituality and within the search for new means of expression with the help of the author's historically forgotten synthesis of contemplation in action for the world of today.

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