

**David Meconi, *The One Christ: St. Augustine's Theology of Deification* (Washington D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 2013, xx + 296 pp. \$58.45).**

Joshua Farris  
Houston Baptist University

David Meconi's *The One Christ* is an excellent defence of the controversial thesis that deification or *theosis* (Meconi does not sharply distinguish the two terms) is central to Augustine's thought. While many interpret Augustine pessimistically, in the sense that Augustine highlights the sinfulness of humanity as his starting point for theological anthropology, that is not the complete story. Meconi contends that there is a more optimistic strand in Augustine's thought as well, according to which humans are designed for a God-like status that occurs at deification. If Meconi is correct in his assessment of Augustine, which is contrary to that found in prevailing scholarship, then *The One Christ* contributes to both Augustinian studies and the theology of deification more generally.

Meconi believes that Augustine's understanding of deification overlaps with prevailing Patristic notions of *theosis*. A common Patristic phrase states, "God became human so humans could become God." Similarly, Augustine, in a sermon, states, "in order to make gods of those who were merely human, one who was God made himself human" (xii). Meconi defines Augustinian deification as "becoming gods," or as "becoming a member of the whole Christ (*Christus totus*)" (xiii), which he expounds upon in chapters 3, 4, and especially 5. Meconi argues that Augustine articulates deification as part of the process of redemption as humans enter into the final state of glory.

In order to set the stage, Meconi offers an initial description and response to the currently dominant, pessimistic reading of Augustine. Representative of this reading is Joseph Mausbach's 1925 study where he argues that Augustine's theology regarding humanity's enslavement to sin led Western Christianity to abandon salvation as deification. In order to revitalize a balanced reading of Augustine that is able to highlight both man's fallenness and deified purpose, Meconi advances two theses. First, Meconi attempts to show that Augustine explicitly affirms the doctrine of human deification in his use of the word "*deificare*" and in other common metaphors representing human participation in the divine. Second, Meconi argues in favor of divine union as a common theme touching the entirety of Augustine's theology. Meconi explains that for Augustine humans unite to the divine through Christ, by which they continually progress toward the divine without ever becoming God.

In chapters 1 and 2, Meconi argues that Augustine perceives the whole of God's story for humankind in light of creation. This, arguably, contrasts with Eastern approaches, where creation is understood in light of the end—that is, glorification. Meconi persuasively shows that for Augustine God desires to be in relation with his creation, but such a state of affairs can only occur through the creation of humans as God's image bearers, who are capable of personally and freely uniting to God, which in turn establishes the foundation for deification.

Meconi helpfully explains the notoriously difficult issue of Augustine's understanding of humans as that which both bear the divine image but are in some sense un-actualized images. There are three important terms here—"image," "equality," and "likeness"—which connect Augustine's theology of humans with his theology of deification. Augustine, along with the Patristic tradition, interprets "image" as distinct from "likeness," yet the manner in which he understands these terms is slightly different from previous theologians, and Augustine's understanding provides an important link for how humans at creation relate to the state of deification. For Augustine, humans always bear the divine image, but images always bear some degree or another of likeness to their exemplar. Other Patristics often affirm something different, specifically, that the image can be lost or assumed at deification. Augustine highlights the notion of likeness as a distinguishing feature of humans, which provides the ground for growth from imperfection to perfection. Finally, Augustine uses the term "*aequalitas*" (i.e., equality) in reference to the goal of humanity. Equality is never literally achievable for humans (i.e., humans never become God or equal with God), but humans can come to share in God's perfection through God the Son. Human propensity toward completion with God provides the ground for understanding Augustine's theology of deification. There is, for humans, an internal instability within each individual human without Christ. Humans are stabilized by the supernatural grace found only in Christ.

Chapter 3 builds on the creation story of humans as created in God's image with some resemblance (or likeness) awaiting completion. According to Meconi, Augustine believes that human transformation from created image to perfected image occurs *via* the Logos's assumption of human form. When God unites to humanity, an "attributive exchange" takes place in which humans take on various attributes predicable of God.

Augustine's limited use of "*deificare*" is also considered in chapter 3. The worry is that Augustine's limited use of "*deificare*" points away from a doctrine of deification. To this concern Meconi offers three probable answers. First, Augustine limits his use of the word because he finds the same deified reality expressed in other Scriptural metaphors, which are sufficient for conveying the same meaning. Second, other Latin thinkers limited their use of the word, so Augustine is simply following the tradition. Finally, Augustine seems to have limited his use because his opponents co-opted the term and used it to mean that we literally become god(s), and Augustine would never wish to violate the Creator and creature distinction.

Chapter 4 offers an analysis of the Holy Spirit's concretizing effects on divine and human unity. The Spirit, for Augustine, consummates the process of deification in the life of the believer by creating a bond between humans and God through the communication of the attributes of unity, holiness, and charity. The Spirit is the one

who actually brings about the union of God and man as a *gift* of grace. Meconi shows that the Spirit *dwells* in the human unlike what is commonly supposed of Augustine, namely, that the Spirit merely *works in* the human.

In chapter 5, Meconi expounds upon Augustine's incarnational and sacramental view of deification as an ecclesial reality. In this context, Augustine develops the concept of *totus Christus* in Christ's mystical body. Citing Gerald Bonner in agreement, Meconi affirms Augustinian deification as "an ecclesial process [taking] place within the communion of the Church, to which the Christian is admitted by baptism. For this reason it can be called a sacramental process, in that the Christian grows in grace by being nourished by the eucharist, which he receives as part of the worship of the Church" (176; favorably citing Bonner, *Augustine's Conception of Deification*).

Meconi concludes by reiterating his thesis: Augustine believed that the central goal of salvation is deification. The remaining bits of the conclusion show the fruit of Meconi's research. First, it reveals the benefit of re-reading Augustine in light of deification. Second, Meconi suggests that his reading of Augustine may have some ecumenical promise between the Christian East and West. In particular, Meconi suggests that there is much overlap between Augustine and Eastern Orthodoxy (where Roman Catholicism and the East are divided on the precise role of the Spirit and the nature of deification) by drawing support from the theologian Myroslaw Tataryn who shows the influence Augustine has on the East. Yet, Meconi only spends one paragraph discussing the ecumenical potential of Augustine and what he does say is simply relying on what Tataryn has stated about a potential influencing relationship. The proposed ecumenical advantages are less than clear given what Meconi has explicitly argued throughout, but, maybe, his only intent is to motivate further dialogue (which he mentions on page 239).

The reader will notice two strengths of *The One Christ*. The first strength exhibits itself in Meconi's attention to texts. Like a good historian, Meconi stays close to Augustine's writings. Secondly, Meconi carefully works through the secondary literature on Augustine—especially as it pertains to more recent literature.

Although in many ways an excellent book, throughout *The One Christ* Meconi leaves several theological concepts and terms undefined. For example, Meconi uses anthropological terms like "soul," "body," and "nous" but with no clear description of what these terms mean and how they function in Augustine's overarching ontology (e.g., see 135-174). However, I suspect that these terms are crucial to understanding Augustine's larger theology of deification.

In the final analysis, *The One Christ* is a useful piece of historical theology. Meconi's careful exposition of Augustine provides fodder for additional work not only in historical theology, but for constructive contemporary theology as well.