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Book Review: *Saint Augustine on the Resurrection of Christ: Teaching, Rhetoric, and Reception* by Gerald O'Collins, SJ

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Gerald O'Collins, *Saint Augustine on the Resurrection of Christ: Teaching, Rhetoric, and Reception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 121 pages.

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Over decades studying the resurrection of Jesus, it always appears odd that there are comparatively few contemporary works treating the centuries of great church fathers who have addressed Christianity's center. Many treasured gems have grown dusty and remain too-seldom remembered. We are the worse for that. Why this research lacuna?

This little volume features well-known researcher Gerald O'Collins entering this void on a subject he knows well, addressing Augustine's thoughts on Jesus' resurrection and teaming with perhaps the world's most respected academic publisher. Who besides Augustine is more erudite, speaks to the entire church, and does so in the classical rhetorical style, providing a magnificent choice?

O'Collins begins his Preface by acknowledging the need for this study. Other major church leaders like Athanasius, Cyril of Alexandria, and Leo the Great wrote major Christological works before and after Augustine, yet, the latter surprisingly did not do so. Augustine's longest treatment of Christology is *The Trinity* 4:1-5, though he still presents many reflections on Christology in his sermons, letters, and other works (v).

Since "Preaching the message of Christ constituted the central core of Augustine's ministry" (vi), the absence of an extended treatment is surprising. This absence encouraged his commentators to concentrate on other themes, like Scripture, the Trinity, original sin, free will, and grace. It remains the case that today, few commentators treat Augustine's message: "we still lack studies precisely on Christ's own resurrection from the dead." O'Collins continues: "This study aims to fill this important gap." (vi)

Towards this goal, O'Collins' five chapters are devoted to key subjects strewn throughout Augustine's writings. Chapter 1 addresses seven major themes regarding Jesus' resurrection. Chapter 2 treats the topic that many readers will appreciate, Augustine's "Arguments for Jesus' Resurrection."

Chapters 3 and 4 largely return to the ideas in Chapters 1 and 2, updating and explicating the themes addressed there. Chapter 3 concerns chiefly the theology of Jesus' resurrection and the truth it insures for believers. Chapter 4 returns to reasons supporting the resurrection, including a good discussion of Jesus' appearances and the empty tomb (83, 99-111), seeking to bring Augustine's apologetic into the present (61-62).

Chapter 5 is the final installment, providing O'Collins' last reflections, including regrets that Augustine never wrote specifically on this topic. This is a theme mentioned throughout, from beginning (v-vi, 3) to end (115, 117).

By way of evaluating the overall contribution, O'Collins helpfully pauses to summarize his chief themes, singling out most frequently the *centrality* of the resurrection message in both the NT and Augustine (vi, 1-4, 29, 36, 63-64, 72). Other examples helpfully outline key subjects (72, 79), especially when chapters 3 and 4 expand earlier ones, which could cause confusion (60-61). Another example is O'Collins' specifying the three most important themes in Chapter 1 (31).

A further strength is the author's disagreements with Augustine. The most frequent example is O'Collins' slight chiding of the great church father for thinking that *touching* the risen Jesus was the highest form of proof in the NT, even though the texts only record Jesus being touched on two occasions, hardly sounding like the chief emphasis! However, for the vast

majority of contemporary commentators, *seeing* the risen Jesus is emphasized far more frequently as the key evidence in the NT texts. Even when infrequently downplaying the aspect of touching (11), Augustine still raises the banner for this theme (16, 43-44, 75-77, 79).

O'Collins summarizes: "Augustine privileges 'touching' rather 'seeing' in his account of what the disciples experienced. In the New Testament, however, the language of 'seeing' easily predominates over any touching or hearing. The disciples' decisive experience of the risen Christ is recalled as seeing him." (16)

O'Collins also comments that Augustine misses another chance to connect the resurrection with the Trinity (73-74). But this seems more mentioned in passing, without carrying the same weight for O'Collins as the earlier seeing/touching critique.

Another positive is O'Collins' ability to pull sometimes brief comments from Augustine's many works (1-2), demonstrating his knowledge of Augustine. A last strength is the variety of evidential looks in Chapter 2. Beyond Augustine's rhetoric, the value of creation and history are discussed, too (50-52).

Just a couple of critical matters might be mentioned briefly. A few repetitious phrases, often worded identically or virtually so, seem to need editing (1-2, 16, 44). While ascertaining how Augustine might champion the resurrection today (61), one wonders why Albert Schweitzer's "fictitious lives" (like Venturini's) or a historical novel like Philip Pullman's provide the best examples? This applies especially to the exceptional length of details here (64-72).

Overall, this is a worthy volume apropos to fulfilling Gerald O'Collins's goal of helping plug the broad gap of sometimes forgotten classical resurrection studies (vi). Writing this work would not have been possible for anyone who did know Augustine.