

Augustine tells his congregation that in the Church sins are forgiven that “are not forgiven apart from the Church.”³⁵ Indeed, sins “must be forgiven in that Spirit by which the Church is gathered together in a unit” (71.28). Why? “Because the Church has received this gift, of sins being forgiven in her in the Holy Spirit.” Indeed, “You can tell you have received the Holy Spirit if you are held in the bond of peace of the Church, which is spread out among all nations. That’s why the apostle says, *Eager to preserve the unity of the Spirit in this bond of peace* (Ephesians 4.3)” (71.28). As for training in what Taylor called “radical reflexivity,”³⁶ Augustine emphasizes that baptism into the Church, with the gift of divine forgiveness constituting this act, is conversion even if the Christians do not yet perceive that they have actually received the Holy Spirit (71.30–31). He reflects, characteristically, on the limits of our self-awareness: “Nor should it strike you as odd that someone should have something and be ignorant of what it is they have. To say nothing of the power of the Almighty and the unity of the unchangeable Trinity, who can easily grasp by knowledge what the soul is?” (71.31).

Time and again, in different genres of writing, Augustine affirms that “the words of God,” represented in Scripture, “make it perfectly clear that, apart from community with Christ, no one can attain eternal life and salvation.” And that, he writes in *The Punishment and Forgiveness of Sins and the Baptism of Little Ones* (411–12), is why we baptize people, however young.³⁷ Through this sacrament “they are joined to the body and members of Christ” (III.4.7). Christ himself “willed that this rebirth be brought about by baptism” and instituted this sacrament of conversion (I.18.23). So while God “is the light of the interior human being,” he “helps us to turn to him” (II.5.5) in the ways he has given people in the Church, which is his body. Conversion “begins with the forgiveness of sins,” but this “interior” renewal continues from day to day (2 Cor. 4.16) in the Catholic Church, where the fruits of the Holy Spirit are bestowed (II.7.9). Preaching to his congregations in the Church at once very visible and invisible, he often stresses that if the forgiveness of sins in Christ “were not to be had in the Church, there would be no hope of a future life and eternal liberation. We thank God, who gave his Church such a gift,” the gift of the baptismal sacrament.³⁸ And, of course, thanks are given for the sacrament of unity where Christians are daily incorporated in the body of Christ.³⁹