

Ragnar Holte: **Monica, "the Philosopher"**

*Nam et feminae sunt apud veteres philosophatae
et philosophia tua mihi plurimum placet ...
egone me non libenter tibi etiam discipulum dabo?
De ordine I,1,31-32*

Monica and the Ostia discourse concerning everlasting life

The very summit of Augustine's famous "Confessions", and indeed one of the most famous passages in the whole world literature, is the dialogue concerning everlasting life reported to have taken place between Augustine and his mother Monica in Ostia, the harbour of Rome, ten days before her decease in 387. The text contains an outstanding paradigm of Augustine's Christian philosophy and culminates in a much discussed mystical "vision of God", equally shared by mother and son.¹

The text is written ten years after the episode is reported to have taken place. From texts contemporary with the episode, we know that Augustine, at the time, was very optimistic about the possibilities to attain much further in the knowledge and vision of God than he had done hitherto.² This optimism, however, was gradually overthrown by a growing conviction of man's permanent sinfulness as hindrance for attaining the full knowledge and vision of God. As a fact, in later works, Augustine never gives us a text as intensive in its mystical experience as the scene from Ostia. In this essay, I will specially stress the import of the case that the partner in the dialogue leading to this outstanding and rather unique experience, is a woman.³

Hardly any Augustinian text has been so often and thoroughly analyzed as the scene from Ostia. Nor has the theme of Monica, and Augustine's relation to her, been neglected in previous research. Still, I have nowhere seen the full implications being brought to light of the fact that Augustine, in this text, presents a woman as an intellectually equal partner for a man, in a philosophical dialogue. In antiquity, it is in no way self-evident that a woman is able to fill such a role.⁴

If, however, we try to trace this aspect further, and strive to reconstruct Monica's contribution to the dialogue, the text appears to be rather elusive, and possible to interpret in two wholly opposite directions. The problem is that the main part of the text describes the themes of the dialogue as object of common discourse and experience but gives no indications whatever about the contributions made by each partaker. All through, Augustine reports what "we" said and what "we" experienced. Only in the concluding paragraph, an attempt is made to reconstruct what "I" and "she" said, and the very transition from the "we"-paragraphs to the concluding "I"- "she"-paragraph is in itself highly problematic.

It is well known that Augustine's Christian philosophy is constructed as a reflection of the universe conceived as a ladder or scale for ascending to God. The ascension proceeds step by step, from the external and material parts of creation, via the spiritual and internal parts, not least via the soul, and its upper part, the spirit of the reflecting subject, to the purely immaterial and spiritual being itself, namely God.⁵

The scene of Ostia is a real scene: "She and I stood alone, leaning in a window, which looked inwards to the garden within the house where we were staying ... There we talked together,

she and I alone, in deep joy ..." - The question that "we" raised was about "the everlasting life of the saints", and the answer to it "we" searched to find, turning "the mouth of our heart" towards the transcendent sources of spiritual water and trying to forget the confusion of the present life. In the next step, "we" walked above the earth among sun, moon and stars, but soon came even higher: to "our rational souls"; and even them "we transcended", arriving thereby, at last, to the everlasting life itself, the eternal divine Wisdom.⁶

At this point, the mystical vision takes place: "While we were thus talking of His Wisdom and panting for it, with all the efforts of our heart we did for one instant attain to touch it; then, sighing and leaving the first fruits of our spirit bound to it, we returned to the sound of our own tongue, in which words must have a beginning and an end ..."7

Even after this very summit of the text, the commentary of the common experience is something "we" make together: "What we said is this: If to any man the tumult of the flesh grew silent, silent the images of earth and sea and air; and if the heavens grew silent, and the very soul grew silent to itself, and, by not thinking of self, mounted beyond self; if all dreams and images grew silent, and every tongue and every symbol - everything that passes away ... and in their silence He alone spoke to us, not by them, but by Himself: so that we should hear His word, not by any tongue of the flesh, not in the voice of an angel, not in the sound of thunder, nor in the darkness of a parable - but we should hear Himself ... should hear Himself and not them ..."8

Well, if this actually took place, we would already find ourselves in the state of resurrection. That's the concluding remark on the Ostia vision of God, clearly showing that the episode is judged in the light of Augustine's later experiences and insights; in 387, he had, indeed, reckoned with the possibility of a full direct vision of God already during earthly life, after intensive efforts to purify the soul morally and sharpen its intellectual ability by dialectical reasoning.⁹

To what extent may Monica have contributed to the pious philosophical discourse or meditation? As I have said already, the text can be interpreted in two opposite ways. The immediate impression of the text is certainly that of a discourse with two partners equally active, each gradually inspiring and heightening the mood of the other, until both reach the moment of wordless ecstasy. On second thought, however, we may have some doubts whether such a procedure is likely to have taken place. The discourse, even if a pious one, is not just like any dialogue taking place between persons sharing a common religious faith. It has clearly a "philosophical" character, presupposing some insight and training in philosophical reasoning of a neo-platonic kind. Monica, however, lacked philosophical education.

Our doubts are strengthened, when we study the problematic transition, in paragraph 26, from "we" to "I" and "she" respectively: "This is approximately what I (sic!) said, if not exactly in this manner or with these words ... and then she said: My son, as for me, the present life has no further joy to offer. What I have yet to do here, or why I am still here, I do not know, since there is nothing further for me to hope for in this world. For one thing only did I want to linger for a time: that I might see you a Catholic Christian before I died. This God bestowed on me superabundantly, even letting me see you despise terrestrial happiness and become His servant. So what do I still do here?"10

What is the reference of the words "this is approximately what I said ..."? Do they refer to the

concluding eschatological remark only, thereby forming a transition to Monica's application of this remark to her own situation? Such an interpretation need not contradict our first reading of the "we"-sections as a real dialogue with two equally active partners.

Or is the "dicebam talia" an unconscious, but deeply revealing slip of the pen, unveiling the true character of the supposed discourse? Did Augustine in fact provide all or most of the talking, reducing his mother's contribution to the role of admiring listener and seconder? Surely the one and only rejoinder expressly attributed to her (the concluding one quoted above) is of a rather unsophisticated and unphilosophical kind.

Augustine's intention, in using the we-form for the main part of the discourse, must certainly have been to hold forth his mother as an equal partner in it, and this is in itself an important observation we can make concerning his attitude to women's ability for religious discourse. If we however try to make clear what Monica's contribution may have been, the text remains elusive, and we cannot avoid wondering about the cleft between their different levels of education, and its implications for the actual course of a dialogue between them. We are, in fact, in urgent need of comparative material from eventual further occasions where Monica is reported to have been partaker in a discourse.

Monica and Augustine's dream of a philosophical otium

Fortunately, such comparative material does exist. In the philosophical dialogues composed during the otium at Cassiciacum, soon after Augustine's conversion in 386, Monica is often a partaker in the discourse. At this occasion, Augustine had a secretary noting down everything that was said. Even if Augustine, afterwards, has provided the literary scope and form for the dialogues, one gets the impression that his intention is to be true to the protocol in reproducing each rejoinder. Surely, these dialogues are far more reliable sources than the Ostia scene from the "Confessions", for forming ourselves a picture of Monica as partaker in a religious and philosophical discourse. The dialogues are composed very soon after the actual events, using a word-by-word protocol of what was being said. The Ostia scene, on the other hand, is written out of memory ten years after the episode took place, and everything is presented and judged out of the partially revised theological standpoint characteristic of the bishop Augustine.

The otium at Cassiciacum represented a new attempt to realize a dream he had born for 13 years: the dream of a common life in constant search for wisdom, shared by several brethren of the same mind.¹¹ The first impulse had come through the reading of Cicero's tract Hortensius, at the age of 19 years.¹² In Augustine's time and milieu, philosophical research nearly always was an endeavour with religious overtones, and in addition, an ascetic style of life, with complete sexual abstinence, was often presupposed as a condition for effectively reaching the goal.¹³

The famous conversion in 386 mainly came as a solution of a moral dilemma. Sexual abstinence had seemed to him personally to be an impossible way to choose, and in fact, he had lived together with a concubine since he was 17 years old.¹⁴ He wanted to have both: a life in search for wisdom, and a life in sexual partnership. But were these two lives really possible to combine? Probably, Augustine had always had the discomfiting feeling of bad conscience for choosing the easy but less effective way instead of the difficult but effective one. As a follower of the Manichees, during ten years, he must have strongly felt this dilemma: for as long as he carried on with the concubinate, he could never be admitted to the inner circle of "the chosen ones" (which presupposed an ascetic life), and so had to acquiesce

in the status of auditor, a member of the outer circle only.¹⁵

After breaking up from the Manichees, Augustine was still planning for a life in philosophical research, and he had still the easy way in view. About ten persons were interested in sharing a common life in philosophical research with him, notwithstanding several of them being married. The financial problems implicated in such an arrangement seemed possible to solve, partly through the participation of his relatively affluent relative Romanianus, partly through his own plans to marry a rich heiress. The life in philosophical otium presupposed willing financiers, especially if several partakers were supposed to have families!¹⁶

Among the ten intended participants, the two personal friends Alypius and Nebridius were especially close to Augustine's heart and to his plans. Alypius, indeed, would gladly have abandoned all thoughts of women and sex, to enjoy the undisturbed friendship with his deeply admired older mate and teacher, and the undisturbed search for wisdom together with him. So Alypius' preference unreservedly lay on the difficult way, implying ascetism, and he found it hard to understand his friend's sexual obsession. If however his friend planned for a marriage, he saw no other solution than to search for a wife, too.¹⁷ Alypius was a close witness to the whole procedure of his friend's conversion and followed him in all decisions, giving the same devoted and uncritical response as always.¹⁸ Nebridius, on the other hand, being a friend of more independent and critical disposition, was not so immediately swayed by Augustine's new conviction, and did not care to make himself free for participation in the Cassiciacum otium. ¹⁹

The importance of the choice between the easy way and the difficult way, as well as Augustine's own key role in the plans for a common life in philosophical research, is shown by the violent reaction of another intended participant, Verecundus. This man, who happened to be the owner of the Cassiciacum villa, was already married. Verecundus felt that Augustine's choice of ascetic life meant a total change in the character of the planned convent. In spite of both Augustine and Alypius trying to assure him that the conditions for his participation had not changed, he felt himself excluded, and irrevocably withdrew any further commitment to the project (apart from letting Augustine dispose his villa for the otium of November 386).²⁰

The further development in fact showed that Verecundus was right in his presumption that, hereafter, married partakers in the planned convent would be unthinkable. When Augustine, after returning to North Africa, in 388, set up to erect the convent "Servants of God" (servi Dei), in his native town Thagaste, the monastic character of the enterprise was quite evident but meant no modification in the basic ideal of philosophical otium. ²¹ The fatal blow against the realization of the intense philosophical dreams borne since 15 years was finally directed by the African church and caused by its urgent need for good leaders. The Christian communities soon began to give the "Servants of God" desirous glances, and the first of the brethren to be chosen bishop was Augustine's closest friend Alypius, whose services were demanded in the closest neighbourhood conceivable, namely Thagaste itself. Augustine tried very hard to avoid suffering the same fate, always avoiding to visit a town where a bishop's chair was vacant. In 391, however, on visit in Hippo to find new recruits for his convent and eventually a better building for it, he was taken by surprise by the community, which chose him a presbyter and assistant for their old bishop, whom he had to succeed only a few years later. In 391, the circle of his closest sympathizers had been reduced through death also: he had lost his second-best friend Nebridius as well as his own son (born by his former concubine) Adeodatus.²²

How shall we relate Monica to Augustine's dreams of a life in philosophical research? In the "Confessions", certainly, Monica is consistently set forth as God's main instrument in bringing Augustine back to the religion of his childhood, and no criticism whatever is directed against the type of religiosity characteristic of the Christian milieu of North Africa, and represented by his mother. In the Cassiciacum dialogues, on the other hand, he has indeed harsh things to say about the North African fideism, and its total dismissal of philosophical research. Having found, at last, in the openminded intellectual milieu in Milan, a way to reconcile authority and reason, and to develop a life of philosophical research on the basis of Christian faith, Augustine openly gives vent to his bitterness over the North African rigidity, which had, he feels, been directly responsible for his many wasted years with the Manichees. The very reason of his deviation to the Manichees was, indeed, that he had found it more wise to trust those which appealed to the intellect than those which only commanded him to faith. The representatives for this faith had shown a "ridiculous superstition" in their dread of philosophical investigations, he remarks.²³

Augustine seems to have met a fideism of the same spirit as that which another famous North African theologian, Tertullian, had propagated more than a century earlier: "Those which have invented a Stoic and Platonic and dialectic form of Christianity may hear and understand: there is no need for curiosity after Jesus Christ, nor for any (philosophical) investigations after the gospel has been proclaimed. When we believe, we wish nothing further than to believe."²⁴

If Augustine apprehended his mother as representing a fideism which, to him, appeared as "ridiculous superstition", and if she, on her side, apprehended her son as practicing an illegitimate philosophical research, this would certainly have been a source for tensions between the two. We must not, however, overemphasize the problem. On the one hand, Monica had no contempt for education - on the contrary, she and her husband Patricius had been of one mind in their firm decision and their great personal efforts to get their most talented son educated.²⁵ She was also flexible in her adaptation to different Christian milieus, and came to admire the Milanese bishop Ambrose greatly for his ability to draw her son nearer to the Church again.²⁶ On the other hand, Augustine's reservations against the fideistic attitude he had met in North African communities did not prevent him from returning to his native land for his further philosophical activities, nor were the "Servants of God" met with suspicion from the communities - on the contrary, the communities were eager to recruit the "servants" as bishops and presbyters.

However, having unwillingly accepted the bishop's chair in Hippo, Augustine seems to have met strong opposition from certain fideistic circles. This is shown in his violent polemics against those who do not accept his philosophical Biblical exegesis.²⁷ In the light of this, we can understand that the "Confessions" are partly written as an apology, to demonstrate his earnest Christian convictions. The prominent place given to Monica, especially to her prayers for the son's Christian conversion and to her full assurance that her prayers finally were answered, certainly has a deliberate apologetic aim. Widows were in high esteem in the early Church, and Monica's status must have been even further enhanced through her faithful endurance together with bishop Ambrose during the Arian persecutions in Milan.²⁸ When writing his "Confessions", Augustine obviously finds it important that such a strong and faithful woman can give him a full Christian legitimation.

Conversion and filial revolt

The rubric may seem very strange: certainly the conversion was an answer to Monica's prayers? Sure, but on a deeper, psychological plane, there seems to be a permanent tension between mother and son, Monica constantly trying to interfere in her son's life, and Augustine constantly trying to free himself from his overprotective mother's dominance. Even after being reconciled to her, and accepting her as God's main instrument for bringing him back to the faith of his childhood, he cannot abstain from discretely criticizing her overprotective manner. A close reading of their detailed relations shows, by the way, that even when Augustine gives in to his mother's will, he does not let her have it quite the way she had planned.

Augustine's method seems to have been always to avoid raising his voice towards his mother or expressly opposing her will,²⁹ and still to act in his own way. The scene to be enacted between them on the North African coast immediately before his departure to Europe, is highly illuminating. Monica beseeched her son, under tears, and firmly holding him in her arms, either to stay or to take her with him. Augustine, in a most cowardly fashion, promised not to go - but secretly slipped away during night!³⁰

About a year later, Monica undertakes the voyage to Europe all by herself - or, more probably, accompanied by her elder son Navigius³¹ - firmly decided to pursue and recapture her escaping younger son. Suddenly, she turns up in Milan, and immediately starts interfering in her son's life again. Highly enthusiastic over her son's new-awakened interest for the church, and his new-won social position in the nearness of the bishop and of the Milanese court, she arranges a favorable marriage for him, and sends his beloved concubine since fourteen years back to North Africa, thereby separating her from their son Adeodatus, too.³² We can imagine that the mother never really had accepted her son's concubine. Though such a liaison was perfectly acceptable before the civil laws, the church judged it as a sin. We can imagine Monica's triumph in finally succeeding to split up the "sinful" liaison between her son and that wretched woman, and to arrange for a marriage highly acceptable for the church as well as for the Milanese aristocracy. Cunningly, she may have tried to dispel eventual doubts on the side of her son by pointing out how the fortune of this bride to be would help to finance his long wished-for life in philosophical otium.

Still, though again giving in to his mother's will, he revolts against it internally, and in fact thwarts her plans. To be sure, he accepts the separation from his concubine, and the "Confessions" contain no word of criticism of this decision, the bishop-author having unreservedly assumed the condemning ecclesiastical attitude to that form of liaison. Still, he cannot avoid testifying of the deep grief he felt being separated from the woman he had loved faithfully during 14 years: "My heart which belonged to her was cut into pieces, wounded and bleeding ..." ³³

The revolt against his mother's will is twofold. Firstly, he immediately takes a new concubine.³⁴ Secondly, he refuses to marry the bride chosen by his mother and instead converts to ascetism.³⁵ Certainly, the religious and philosophical motives for the conversion are of decisive importance, but the proceeding is complex, and surely his mother's interference in his sexual life creates the acute crisis which calls forth the kind of resolution given through the conversion.

Augustine stresses his own passive role in the separation from his concubine but does not expressly mention her mother's initiative either: "The concubine with whom I was used to sleep was teared away from my side ..." ³⁶ The plans for a marriage are mentioned in the same

passive way: "I was untiringly harassed about marriage ..."37 Augustine's response to his mother's constant summons is the same as it has been since childhood: externally giving in to her will ("already I proposed, and already I was accepted, mainly as a result of my mother's efforts ..."), internally revolting and going his own way. Well, his mother may take his concubine from him; he will choose another, or anyway: if he is not permitted to live with a woman of his own choice, he will rather stay a celibataire than to marry a woman chosen by his mother! Psychologically, I certainly think that this wrestling with his mother's will is an important ingredient in the convertive process. Okey, he is going to be a Christian - and that is what his mother always dreamed of and prayed for - but he will do it his own way, not the way his mother had devised!

All this, however, is to be regarded as tensions existing below the surface, and they never result in an open conflict. For Augustine's choice of an ascetic life in whole-hearted research of God is indeed a choice of a better and higher Christian way, according to the deepest conviction of both parties. Augustine himself has come to a final solution of the internal disintegration caused by his original arousal for philosophical research at the age of 19, and his perpetual failures in trying to respond to it. Monica, on her side, finds that God has given her more than she had prayed and hoped for, when she wanted to see her son a Catholic Christian: "this God bestowed on me superabundantly, even letting me see you despise terrestrial happiness (sic!) and become His servant".38

Monica and the Cassiciacum otium

So the conversion certainly brought about a new harmonious understanding between mother and son. We are not surprised then to find Monica as self-evident hostess for the group gathering at the Cassiciacum villa, to enjoy a real philosophical otium. Nor has the gathering adopted a monastic form creating difficulties for the participation of a woman. By the way, when planning his return to North Africa, to erect his philosophical convent, he probably still has presupposed that his mother would live together with him and his brethren in religious and philosophical research. Only after Monica's death, the plans are transformed more in the monastic direction.

Augustine's excellent biographer Peter Brown has given a wifful characteristic of "the ill-sorted company" that Augustine had collected for his first real philosophical otium. Having heard of the ten people included in Augustine's plans for a philosophical convent, we are surprised to find only one of them present at Cassiciacum, namely his closest friend Alypius, and even he for the most part absent, having duties to perform in Milan. Instead we find a group consisting of "a pious old woman, two uneducated cousins, and two private pupils, aged about 16", furthermore his even younger son Adeodatus, and his elder brother Navigius.

"Monica is in charge of the household. She is as awesome as ever, seeming to draw upon hidden resources of absolute certainty. She can dismiss a whole philosophical school in a single vulgar word; and her son has established her, with great intensity, as an oracle of primitive Catholic piety. Augustine's eldest brother, Navigius, makes a surprising, and unique appearance ... and he is the only one of the group who persistently refuses to see the point of what his younger brother is saying."39

One important ingredient in the Cassiciacum otium is Augustine's instruction of his two private pupils Licentius and Trygetius, which he constantly tries to excite in love for philosophy and train in philosophical discourse. Licentius was the son of his old friend, sponsor and benefactor Romanianus, and Augustine's relationship to this boy is the one that is

most "clearly illuminated in these pages ... For Licentius was the 'star' pupil, whose intellectual grooming interested Augustine's principal readers, the friends of the boy's father" (to whom one of the dialogues is dedicated). "Thus while his own son, Adeodatus, emerges only slightly in these dialogues, Licentius felt the full weight of Augustine's intensity ... The group lived in a state of continuous intellectual excitement."⁴⁰

Which were the intellectual presuppositions of the different attendants to partake in a philosophical discourse? Augustine himself was the only one who had a complete education at higher intellectual level, though Alypius, too, a former pupil of Augustine, may have come in the nearness of the education of his older friend. As a philosopher, however, Augustine was rather an autodidact, the higher education in North Africa having been very one-sidedly concentrated on linguistics, literature, and rhetorics.⁴¹ One important aspect of Augustine's conversion is his reaction against a literary and rhetoric ideal of education and his choice of a philosophical and dialectical ideal. The rhetoric ideal, he thought, directs your attention to the surface of things instead of their real content; it teaches you how to seduce people with words and to persuade them with rhetorical finesses instead of searching the truth and teaching people how to build up arguments and support them with reasons.⁴² The Latin North Africans were very proud of their literature, and even middle class people probably received some form of basic linguistic and literary instruction.

We cannot know for sure to what extent other members of Augustine's family, including his mother, had received such a form of basic literary instruction, but Augustine gives an indirect testimony of this in his short characteristic of the partakers in the dialogue "On happiness". Having mentioned his mother, his brother, his son, and his two pupils, he adds that even his two cousins were invited to partake, though these had not even studied grammaticum, i.e. linguistics at a primary school level.⁴³ Clearly mentioning these two as an exception, he indirectly tells us that all other participants, including his mother, had received some form of basic linguistic and literary instruction.

The themes being discussed in the Cassiciacum discourses are clearly stated in the titles of the three dialogues emerging from the otium there, namely "Against the Academics", "On order", and "On happiness".⁴⁴ "The Academics" are the philosophers belonging to the philosophical Academy founded by Plato. In its later development, it had defended a sceptical philosophy, and Augustine had been influenced by this during the short period between his breach with the Manichees and his encounter with the Neo-Platonic form of Christianity flourishing in Milan.⁴⁵ Against the sceptic thesis that truth cannot be found, Augustine asserts that even if truth cannot be found using human reason alone, it can be found starting with faith in the authority of Christ, the incarnated Truth.

In "On order", Augustine starts a treatment of the God-created order sustaining the whole universe, and touches on the problem of evil, but soon the discussion slips into a siding, and the main part of the dialogue deals with the order of study, consisting in the right balance between authority and reason.

With "On happiness", we lodge into the very master theme of late ancient philosophy, the question about the goal of life, where the conception of "eudaimonía" (happiness), from Greek philosophy, and the biblical "makariótes" (blessedness) have been melted together in the Latin discussion on "beata vita".

The partakers in the three dialogues are somewhat varying. The two pupils Licentius and

Trygetius are everywhere partaking, together with their teacher Augustine. In "Against the Academics", Augustine is especially active in training them to discuss and formulate good arguments, and here, Alypius' contribution is important, too, the discussion being several times postponed because of his absence. The same persons are the main partakers in "On order". The discussion "On happiness" took place on Augustine's birthday and on two further days, when Alypius was absent. On this occasion, Augustine had invited all his family members to partake. His elder brother Navigius is mentioned as partaker in all the three dialogues but very seldom is reported to have contributed to the discussion.

As for Monica, she contributes most actively in the discussion "On happiness", and she appears several times in the discourse "On order". In "Against the Academics", she is mentioned only as being in charge of the household and sometimes interrupting the discussions when calling the partakers to meals.⁴⁶ There is an interesting progression in Monica's contributions, and with regard to this, I conclude that the discussions have taken place in the following order: "Against the Academics", book I, "On Order", book I, "On happiness", and thereafter (the internal order being uncertain) the later parts of "On order" and "Against the Academics".

Women and philosophy according to "On order", I and II

Monica's first appearance in the discussions gives rise to an interesting fundamental treatment of the problem women and philosophy. Towards the end of "On order", book I, Monica suddenly enters the room where the discourse takes place, and asks how it has proceeded - for she held herself informed about the theme discussed, the text makes clear. Augustine then makes a sign to the secretary to protocol her entrance and her question. Monica reacts with astonishment and says: "What are you doing? I have never noticed, in the books you recite, any women partaking in these kinds of discourse."⁴⁷

Augustine makes an exhaustive commentary to this, affirming that he does not care for the judgment from proud and ignorant people, or from those that eventually are going to read the book ("On order") out of pure curiosity. As for those which really want to study the book, out of interest for its philosophical content, Augustine finds it most improbable that they would take offence at the participation of his mother, in these discourses. "Do believe me: there will even be persons who will appreciate more than anything else that they find in my book, either pleasant or serious, the fact that you are philosophizing together with me. For on the one hand, women did partake in philosophical study, among the classics, and on the other, your philosophy pleases me highly." This judgment is given a double motivation: on the one hand, Augustine tells us that he has noticed that the philosophical books which were recited at the Cassiciacum sessions were already known to his mother. On the other hand, "philosophy" literally means "love for wisdom", and Monica has went so far in her love for wisdom - wisdom being identical with Christ - that she fears neither fortune nor death, an attitude very difficult to attain even for learned persons, and considered as the arch of philosophy.. "So why shouldn't I willingly give you myself as pupil?"⁴⁸

Augustine here take a fundamental position to the problem women and philosophy discussed by classical philosophers. Whereas Plato had an ambivalent and Aristotle a negative view of women's intellectual capacity⁴⁹, Augustine here follows the line of the later Stoics in acknowledging women's ability and right to partake in philosophical discourses.⁵⁰ This is also in accordance with Clement of Alexandria and the Cappadocian fathers.⁵¹ For Augustine, philosophy in its true meaning presupposes a Christian interpretation, but it is not identical with mere faith but represents a higher intellectual and moral level of the Christian

life, to be compared with the "gnosis" in Alexandrian theology. Intellectual training and moral (ascetic) cleansing are of equal importance in this philosophy.⁵² We could eventually have expected Augustine to regard his mother as representing mere faith only, but instead, he acknowledges her "a philosopher", mainly because of her very far-advanced moral-ascetic attitude, but also because of her intellectual ability and elementary philosophical insight, notwithstanding the sparse and undeveloped state of the latter.

As already noted, there seems, however, to take place a progression in Monica's as well as her son's attitude to Monica's direct participation in the philosophical discourses. From the beginning, she is mainly in charge of the household, though listening to the recital from philosophical books, and holding herself oriented of the themes discussed by the men. The commentaries on women and philosophy, in the end of "On order", book I, represents Monica's break into the group, as full participant. This is carried into effect in "On happiness", in a way which occasions a commentary in the beginning of "On order", book II. In clear difference from the beginning of book I, it is here stated: "My mother, too, was a partaker. I knew her intellectual ability and her intensive love for the divine things, from a long experience during our life together. Above this, she had partaken in a discourse which I had initiated on my birthday - I have written a small book about it. This discourse dealt with a most important subject, and her contributions showed such an impressive intellectual capacity that I cannot think of any one who would be more apt for true philosophy than she. I therefore tried to arrange things so as to make it possible for her to partake, as much as possible, in our discussions without being too burdened with other occupations."⁵³

Monica "On happiness", 1st day discussion

Now let us look at the birthday discourse (proceeding during two further days) "On happiness", with special regard to Monica's contribution. A modern reader, used to regard philosophy and Christian Bible-inspired reflection as two separate things, will be astonished to find the discourse totally structured out from a pattern fetched from late ancient philosophy. The terminology is mainly taken from this philosophical tradition, and the biblical references are rather sparse. Monica herself, far from exhibiting any simple fideistic attitude, proves herself able to let her utterances fit into this philosophical pattern, or to accept her son's way of interpreting them so that they fit in.

In presenting the partakers of the discourse, Augustine mentions Monica as "my mother, to whom the merits belong, I believe, for all that my life represents".⁵⁴ Opening the discourse, Augustine, true to the classical pattern, starts with an anthropological question: "Do you find it evident that we are composed of soul and body?" All except, typically, the elder brother Navigius immediately agree to this, and having finally convinced Navigius too, Augustine proceeds: "Now that all have agreed that man cannot exist, either without body, either without soul - for which of these do we seek nourishment?" The question brings forth some confusion, but gradually one approaches the position that soul and body both have need for nourishment, but of different kind. Augustine tries to help the discussion forwards by asking: "What about the soul? Doesn't it have its proper nourishment? Could it be knowledge, do you think?"⁵⁵

Here comes Monica's first contribution to the discourse: "Certainly; I believe that there is no other nourishment for the soul than knowledge and understanding of things." Trygetius still being unconvinced, Monica cleverly remarks: "Didn't you yourself demonstrate to-day, where and from where the soul is nourished? For a moment during our meal, you remarked that you did not know which dishes you had been eating, having been totally absent-minded, and still you had not desisted from taking your share and consuming it. So where was your spirit while

you were eating without noticing? Believe me, the spirit has its proper nourishment, i.e. its conceptions and ideas, used as means for perceiving things."⁵⁶

Augustine proceeds the discourse by making everybody second the psychological axiom (a real "topos" in this kind of discourse): "We all want to be happy." There follows a question: "Can a person be happy, if he has not got what he wants?" Here comes Monica's second contribution: "The one who wants and has the good, is happy. The one who wants the evil is unhappy, even if he has got it."⁵⁷

Here Augustine smiles to his mother and gives audible expression of his joy: "Mother, you have completely vanquished the very arch of philosophy." He goes further to quote a long passage from Cicero's "Hortensius" speaking in the same direction, evoking thereby an enthusiastic reaction from his mother: "To these words, my mother gave her acclamation so forcefully, that we, totally forgetting her sex, thought we had a huge man among us. I, however, did understand, according to my capacity, from what source, and to what extent a divine one, she drew her insight."⁵⁸

In the continued discussion, there arises an agreement that any one who puts his trust in external goods is unhappy, because he must live in a constant fear of losing everything. Again, Monica contributes: "Even if some one could be sure that these external possessions would not be taken from him, he would be unhappy. For he would think he never had enough of external goods, and so would suffer constant want." But suppose, Augustine turns in, that a person living in external prosperity and superfluity is able to restrict his desire, remains content with that which he has already got, and enjoys it respectfully and gratefully - wouldn't we consider him happy? Monica gives the answer: "In that case he is happy, not because of these external things but because of the moderation of his soul." Augustine's commentary to this answer runs: "Excellently; there was none other adequate answer to my question, and no other answer could be expected from you."⁵⁹

We have attained here an important point in the discourse. According to the pattern furnished by ancient philosophy (as imparted by Latin authors like Cicero and Varro) a key decision in the discourse about happiness is whether, man consisting of soul and body, happiness lies in the good of the soul, or in the good of the body, or in a combination of both. The Cassiciacum discourse has here decidedly taken position for the first of these alternatives, i.e. the position held by Stoics and Platonists, and it is important to note that Monica is the one who formulates this decisive point: happiness consists, not in external goods (i.e. the good of the body) but in "moderation of the soul" (i.e. in the good of the soul = virtue).

"On happiness" contains, side by side, utterances saying that happiness consists in virtue and that it consists in communion with God. Augustine later came to refute the thesis that happiness consists in virtue and to acknowledge only the thesis that it consists in communion with God, which is the Neo-Platonic position.⁶⁰ There is, however, not necessarily an antithesis between the two positions, if virtue is understood in a religious context, as is the case in "On happiness".

Monica "On happiness", 2nd day discussion

The conception "to have (or possess) God" plays an important role in the continued discourse of the second day. Presupposing the psychological axiom that we all want to be happy, and that no one can be happy who has not got what he wants, or who lives in constant fear of

loosing it, one comes to the conclusion that only the one who "has God" is happy, because only God is eternal and enduring, he is the Supreme Good. But the question arises: who "has" God? Here, several partakers, in different wordings, suggest that the one who lives virtuously "has" God (and so combine, as already mentioned, the two positions that happiness consists in virtue and that it consists in communion with God).⁶¹

But what about the one who lives virtuously but still only seeks God? According to the suggested definition, he "has" God already and is thus happy, because he lives virtuously? Here the partakers find themselves trapped in their own foregoing statements and begin to laugh. Monica however, having been sitting silent for a while, asks for a further explanation of the dilemma arisen out of the logical inference, and having got this, she continues: "Obviously no one can attain God who has not already searched for him." - "Certainly not." - "And the one who seeks God, obviously has not yet reached him. It seems to be wrong then, to say that every one who lives virtuously 'has' God. But in my opinion, it is inconceivable that anybody at all would not 'have' God. The one who lives virtuously 'has' a gracious God, whereas the one who lives viciously 'has' a wrathful God. So it was wrong when we settled that every one is happy who 'has' God. Everybody, in fact, 'has' God, but certainly not everybody is happy. You should therefore add the word 'gracious!'"⁶²

Monica here, again, brings the discussion to a new turning-point. The Christian conception of creation, implying that everybody stands in a relation to God, willingly or unwillingly, together with the conceptions grace and wrath, certainly complicate the philosophical pattern. Monica's utterance still, however, seems to leave some questions unsolved - for what about the one who still seeks God? Doesn't he hold some kind of intermediary state between having a gracious and a wrathful God respectively?

So Monica again revises and completes her foregoing statements: "One thing is to 'have' God, another not to be without God ... As far as I can understand, this must be my standpoint: the one who lives virtuously 'has' God, but as gracious. The one who lives viciously 'has' God, but as wrathful. The one who still seeks God but has not yet reached him does not 'have' God but, on the other hand, is not without God."⁶³

Now the question arises, whether the one who seeks God, should not be considered to have a gracious God, too. If, however, every one who has a gracious God is happy, then also the one who seeks God is happy, in spite of not having got what he wants. We notice, again, that Monica is certainly not speaking out of any simple fideistic position: she acknowledges the full weight of an intuitively perceived psychological axiom, as well as of logical reasoning and conclusions drawn from this, even when the discussion focusses on central themes within Christian faith.

"I can certainly not concede that the one who has not got what he wants is happy", Monica sets on. "Thus not every one who has a gracious God is happy", her son turns in. "If reason forces us to that conclusion, I cannot deny it." Augustine finally summarizes the conclusions concerning the questions raised by his mother: "So we lodge in the following distribution: ... Every one who has found God 'has' a gracious God, and is happy. Every one who still seeks God 'has' a gracious God, but is not yet happy. And the one who, through his sins and vices, withdraws from God, neither is happy, nor lives in relation to a gracious God."⁶⁴

Monica "On happiness", 3rd day discussion

In the third day discussions, Augustine takes up, from the first session, Monica's combination of "be miserable" and "be in want". All agree that every one who is in want is miserable. Is it also true, that every one who is miserable is wanting? Against this seems to speak, that the one who had everything he wanted was miserable, not because he wanted something but because he feared to lose everything. Augustine, then, concludes against Monica: "It is therefore not true that every one who is miserable is wanting." Here all other partakers agree, but Monica, after some hesitation, sticks to her opinion: "I can still not understand how it is possible to separate misery from want and want from misery. Let us regard the man who was wealthy and very well off and, according to your assertions, did not want anything further. He did however fear that all this would be taken away from him. But then, obviously, he lacked wisdom! What reason is there to say that only the one who lacks money and property is in want, but not the one who lacks wisdom?"⁶⁵

Here again, Monica has set down an important point in the discussion. In consequence with the thesis that happiness consists in the good of the soul, i.e. virtue or wisdom, misery must consist in the absence of this. Augustine is indeed most acknowledging in his commentary: "All partakers burst out in admiring exclamations over this utterance. Not least, I was glad and elevated myself to hear from my mother the fundamental philosophical truth I had intended to derive from the tracts of the philosophers, to form the conclusion of our total discourse."⁶⁶

The dialogue, however, goes on, giving further precisions on wisdom and happiness and leading to a theological culmination, where Christ, the personified Truth and Wisdom, is related to the two other persons within the Trinity. This gives occasion for Monica to intone the Ambrosian hymn "Fove precantes, Trinitas" and after that to conclude: "This certainly is happiness, i. e. the perfect life. Let us trust that we will soon be brought there, by a solid faith, a living hope, and an ardent love!"⁶⁷

"On happiness" is the most positive and constructive dialogue among the Cassiciacum triad. It deals with the master theme of late ancient philosophy, the goal of life. Monica, as we have seen, takes very active part in the discussions, accepts fully its philosophical presuppositions and shows a most remarkable ability to contribute with independent arguments which partly exhibit elementary knowledge of philosophical alternatives in the debate, partly introduce new points of view drawn from her intuitive apprehension of Christian faith.

Monica "On order"

"On order", book II, contains statements from Monica, too, though her participation here has a more occasional character. Her contributions, however, appear in the most constructive part of the dialogue and comment on its most important and difficult problem, namely the question of evil vis-à-vis universal God-created order. The problem is that God is the author and regulator of everything and still cannot be the author of evil. Is it possible, then, for anything to arise outside God-created order? Monica takes the following position to the problem: "I don't think it is true that nothing can happen outside God's order. For the evil that has arisen has in no way arisen because of God's order. On the other hand, his justice has not permitted the evil to remain unregulated. He has subjugated it and brought it under order in the way it deserves."⁶⁸

No one, in fact - Augustine himself not excluded - comes nearer a solution than this, in the continued discussion. For Augustine finds that the group is not yet sufficiently prepared, intellectually and morally, to dive deeper into the problem. At this point, instead, he begins to expound the right order of study, consisting in a right balance between authority and

reason.⁶⁹ He concludes his exposé by emphasizing the importance of prayer, in the philosophical search for truth. In this connection, he directly apostrophizes the efforts of his mother. His mother's prayers, he asserts, has had a tremendous importance for his own development and decidedly helped him to attain the present state of a life totally dedicated to the search of truth; it also helped the partakers in the Cassiciacum discourses to proceed in their search.⁷⁰

Monica on "The Academics"

As already mentioned, Monica does not partake in the discourse "Against the Academics". She has, however, given a short utterance to the problem discussed. At a certain stage of the discourse "On happiness", namely, Augustine remarks that one of the arguments that all have agreed upon may be used as a decisive argument against the Academics.⁷¹ The situation becomes a little painful for young Licentius, because, in the other discourse, he has argued in favour of the Academics, but now, having consented to the argument in question, has unknowingly contributed to the refutation of their opinions. This causes merriness and laughter, but Augustine suddenly realizes that several partakers in the discourse, including his mother, are not informed about the development of the discussion on the other theme. The passage gives a lovely illustration to the sensibility and finesse with which Augustine handles a situation like this, as also to Monica's assertiveness and temperament, so I quote most of it:

"While we teased him (Licentius) with these words ... I noticed that the other partakers, who were ignorant of the matter we discussed, but wanted to be informed, regarded us without smiling ... And since I was the one who had invited all the partakers ... I became shocked over this inequality and discrepancy ... I smiled at my mother, and she, in very good humour ... said: 'Well, now, tell us: who are these Academics and what do they want?' I gave a short and clear exposé, so that none of them would leave our discourse uninformed. 'Those people are precipitators', she snapped (using a vulgar word for epileptics), and at once rose and went out. So our session ended in joy and laughter, and every one retired."⁷²

This is the episode that Peter Brown refers to when he says, in his appreciation of Monica: "She can dismiss a whole philosophical school in a single vulgar word."⁷³ The episode certainly gives a very lively illustration of Monica's assertiveness and temperament, but it is not at all typical for her participation in the discourses. The episode, in fact, forms no part of the discourse itself but has the character of a free commentary in the margin. When Augustine decided to keep this little altercation for posterity, he may however have meant to show, that his mother sometimes had the ability to catch, intuitively and immediately, the same truth that he and his pupils needed many sessions to establish, using a complicated chain of arguments.

The episode may also give us a clue to the choice of subjects which came to decide Monica's participation in the Cassiciacum dialogues. As we have already established, her presence and her contributions in the discourses always came to pass in phases of positive and constructive treatment of fundamental issues within life philosophy and faith. To find out arguments to refute a school of philosophical scepticism was important for a man who, like Augustine, had been fighting with his doubts during a couple of years, and for youths who were yet undecided in their choice of world-view and could easily be seduced by this kind of thinking. For a pious middle-aged woman of 55 (not really "old", as Peter Brown characterizes her⁷⁴) and very firm in her belief, it would however have been a waste of time to engage herself in this kind of discourse. Augustine and his mother may very well have been of one mind in their opinions about this.

Monica at Cassiciacum and in Ostia

Our exhaustive study of Monica's contribution to the Cassiciacum dialogues has certainly furnished us with a very good background for understanding the famous Ostia discourse reported to have taken place about a year later.⁷⁵

A detailed reconstruction of the discourse is of course still not possible. We need however to be in no doubt that Monica has been a most active partner in it. The picture created by Augustine, of a gradual progression in the dialogue, with a long series of mutually inspiring interchange and repartees, does seem most probable. It was certainly not Monica's habit, in the intercourse with her son, to be a tacid listener, and the son had an enormous respect for her pious experience and insight. She was for him "a philosopher", whose pupil he was not ashamed to be. He probably needed his philosophical expert-knowledge and training to be a self-confident intellectual partner for a woman speaking out from such funds of assertiveness and parental authority as Monica. She, on her side, shows a most remarkable intellectual flexibility in really trying to understand and respect her son's new-won positions and insights, and also showing a capacity of adapting herself to this way of reasoning and of contributing constructively to the discourse, even if she, on her side, henceforth also sees herself as a pupil to her learned son. There is a most touching and enchanting mutual respect and acknowledgement, or even humility, an ardent wish from either side to be instructed, inspired and elevated by the other's experiences and insights.

Monica and Augustine, as we meet them at Cassiciacum and in Ostia, are to human beings who, after many years of strong internal tension, have come to a new harmonious understanding of each other, implying a readiness and ability to treat each other as equals in intellectual and spiritual discourse.

1 Confessiones IX,10,23-26

2 De ordine II,9,26

3 De continentia 8,19

4 Concerning women in philosophical and religious contexts during antiquity and early Christianity see K. Aspegren, *The Male Woman*, Uppsala 1990.

5 R. Holte, *Béatitude et sagesse*, 1962, ch. 19, 29, 30.

6 Conf. IX,10,23-24

7 Conf. IX,10,24

8 Conf. IX,10,25

9 De ordine II,9,26

10 Conf. IX,10,26

11 Conf. VI,10,16-17; 14,24

12 De beata vita 1,4; Conf. III,4,7-8

13 Holte, *Béatitude et sagesse*, ch. 4 & 13

14 Conf. III,1,1; IV,2,2;

15 De beata vita 1,4; Conf. III,6,10-10,18; V,3,3-6,13

16 Conf. VI,14,24

17 Conf. VI,12,21-22

18 Conf. VIII,8,19-12,30; IX,4,7-8; 6,14

19 Conf. IX,3,6-IV,7, and letters from Augustine to Nebridius

20 Conf. IX,3,5-6

21 P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 1967, ch. 13

22 *Ibm.*

- 23 De beata vita 1,4. Holte, Béatitude et sagesse, ch.15
- 24 De praescriptione 7,11-12
- 25 Conf.II,3,8
- 26 Conf.VI,1,1-2,2
- 27 Conf.XII,14,17-32,43
- 28 Conf.IX,7,15
- 29 Conf.IX,12,30
- 30 Conf.V,8,15
- 31 In that case, Augustine neglects to inform us of it, but Navigius in fact was a partaker in the Cassiciacum otium (De beata vita 2,6; Contra Acad. I,2,5) and was present at Monica's death bed (Conf.IX,11,27); surely the most probable explanation of his appearance in Italy is that he had been persuaded by his mother to accompany her on her voyage to Milan, though Augustine considers his brother too unimportant to mention it; the only time Navigius is mentioned (though not by name!) in the "Confessions" he is criticized for expressing "hollow thoughts" at Monica's death bed and is thus reproached by his mother!
- 32 Conf.VI,1,1-2,2; 13,23; 15,25
- 33 Conf.VI,16,25
- 34 Ibm
- 35 Conf.VI,12,30
- 36 Conf.VI,16,25
- 37 Conf.VI,13,23
- 38 Conf.IX,10,26
- 39 Brown, Augustine of Hippo, p. 118 f.
- 40 Ibm p. 118
- 41 Ibm p. 35 f.
- 42 Holte, Béatitude et sagesse, pp. 149 & 365
- 43 De beata vita 1,6
- 44 The latin titles are: Contra Academicos, De ordine, De beata vita
- 45 De beata vita 1,4; Conf.V,10,19
- 46 Contra Acad.I,9,25; II,5,13
- 47 De ordine I,11,31
- 48 Ibm I,11,31-32
- 49 Aspegren, The Male Woman, p. 22 ff., 40 ff.
- 50 Ibm p. 57 ff.
- 51 Ibm p. 151 f. - The foremost early Christian example of a female theologian and philosopher is Macrina, whose reflections are documented in two books by her brother Gregory of Nysse: Vitae Macrinae Junioris, and: Dialogus de anima et resurrectione qui inscribitur Macrina
- 52 De ordine II,9,26 ff. - Holte, Béatitude et sagesse, ch.15
- 53 De ordine II,1,1
- 54 De beata vita 1,6
- 55 Ibm 2,7-8
- 56 Ibm 2,8
- 57 Ibm 2,10
- 58 Ibm
- 59 Ibm 2,11
- 60 Retractationes I,1,2,5. - Holte, Béatitude et sagesse, ch.16.
- 61 De beata vita 2,12; 3,17-18
- 62 Ibm 3,19
- 63 Ibm 3,21

- 64 Ibm
- 65 Ibm 4,23 ff.; 4,27
- 66 Ibm 4,27
- 67 Ibm 5,35
- 68 De ordine II,7,23
- 69 Ibm II,7,24 ff.
- 70 Ibm II,20,52
- 71 De beata vita 2,13 ff.
- 72 Ibm 2,16
- 73 Brown, Augustine of Hippo, p.118
- 74 Ibm p. 119
- 75 Conf. IX,10,23-26. Cf. the introductory paragraph of the present essay.