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**The Agency of Prayers and their Benefit to the Dead:
The Continuity of the Commemoration of the Sinful Dead,
400 - 1240**

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According to their hagiographies, medieval saints could cure or let languish the devoted followers of their cults. Humans were at their mercy, and of course by extension at God's mercy. For the ordinary dead, however, these roles were reversed. In Late Antiquity, Augustine of Hippo's De cura pro mortuis gerenda reveals the belief that the living had the power to aid their deceased loved ones, as well as the anxieties theologians had about the place of commemoration within a Christian framework. Conversely, in Gregory the Great's sixth-century Dialogues (book four) a different clerical viewpoint emerges, one much more at ease with the commemoration of the dead and the agency of the living to benefit the dead. A final analysis of an exemplum recorded by Caesarius of Heisterbach (d. 1240) likewise illustrates the continuity of these beliefs into the later middle ages. Through this three-fold analysis and close reading, the desire and perceived duty of medieval religious people to expend time and effort, not on themselves but for the sake of the souls (and the memories) of those suffering in the afterlife manifests as pervasive and integral to a medieval understanding of personal agency in an otherwise chaotic world.

Saints were the first line of defense in a medieval world of death, disease, and misfortune. In the narratives medieval people told of saints, agency and control were firmly in the hands of these special dead saints to cure or to let languish the devoted followers of their cults. Giants in the field, such as Peter Brown, Patrick Geary, and Robert Bartlett have explored this topic at length in their work. But what of the ordinary dead? How was the perceived power dynamic different in relationships between the living and the ordinary dead, and how did these relationships change from the fourth to the twelfth centuries? Using the writings of Augustine, Gregory the Great, and

the Cistercian monk Caesarius of Heisterbach, I argue that the desire and perceived duty of medieval religious people to expend time and effort, not on themselves but for the sake of the souls (and the memories) of those suffering in the afterlife is pervasive and integral to a medieval understanding of personal agency in an otherwise chaotic world. In instances concerning the ordinary dead, instead of being at the mercy of powerful supernatural beings as in relationships with saints, it is the living who have agency and power.

Augustine of Hippo was not the first to comment on or attempt to censure the persistent belief in Late Antiquity among new converts that the living had the power to aid their deceased loved ones.¹ As a foundational Church Father, however, he is a good starting point and reveals the anxieties early theologians had about the place of remembering the dead within a Christian framework. He is hesitant, but ultimately even he concedes to the pervading sentiment across the majority of the Middle Ages: that of emphatic support of and belief in the agency of the living to benefit the dead, even if this had potentially blasphemous pre-Christian implications.

Within the context of a rapidly Christianizing Late Roman Empire, from the fringes of Northern Africa, Augustine of Hippo was prolific in the quantity and quality of his theological writings.² Many of these writings including the books of his famous works like *City of God* are dedicated to his ideas concerning the dead.³ One of his let-

1 Opinions on the nuance of Augustine's beliefs differ significantly: Moreira, *Dreams*, 42; Schmitt, *Ghosts*, 15, 17; Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 5; Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead*, 40. Moreover (and perhaps paradoxically), at the heart of Augustine's theology was the idea that, even as he tried to explain the mysteries of the unknown in his works, God was ultimately unknowable, and so "divine mysteries were unsuitable for intellectual analysis": Licence, "The Gift of Seeing Demons," 52.

2 For more on Augustine's early life and context, see: Moreira, *Dreams*, 29; Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle*, 1; Asiedu, "Caritas, Amicitia, and the Ideal Reader," 107-8; Constable, "The Commemoration of the Dead," 101.

3 Other Augustinian writings relevant to the discussion of disembodied souls and their place (if any) on earth, include: The latter chapters of *The City of God* (*De civitate Dei*, c. 426 CE), the twelfth book of *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* (*De genesi ad litteram*, c. 415 CE), *Treatise on the Soul and Its Origin* (*De anima et eius origine*, c. 419 CE), *Concerning Faith of Things Not Seen* (*De fide rerum invisibilium*, c. 400 CE), *On the Divination of Demons* (*De divinatione daemonum*, c. 406 CE), and *On the Care to Be Had for the Dead* (*De cura pro mortuis gerenda*, c. 422 CE).

ters in particular, however, addressed to his friend and fellow Christian Paulinus of Nola (d. 431) is a succinct and insightful distillation of his thoughts concerning the agency of the dead, as well as the living's potential agency over the dead.⁴ For the purposes of this paper, I will be using a translation by John A. Lacy, reprinted in 1999.

“On the Care to Be Had for the Dead,” or *De cura pro mortuis gerenda* in Latin, is one of many correspondences with Bishop Paulinus, early caretaker and devotee of St. Felix of Nola. In a previous letter, Paulinus had asked Augustine about a religious woman named Flora; her son had recently died, and she had asked Paulinus if it would be possible, or of benefit to the boy's soul, to bury his body near the shrine of St. Felix.⁵ In this response letter, Augustine gives his opinion and provides various details of his theology that, in some respects, would resonate in later centuries.

Augustine begins by saying that, although he knows that Paulinus's intentions are good, he would be in error for burying the boy near the tomb: what matters most to Augustine is what the individual has done in life, not what happens to the body after death.⁶ He is hesitant to support prayers, masses, and alms for the dead, saying, “There are those [who are evil] whom these works aid in no way, [as well as] those whose merits are so good that they have no need of them,” and further that “whatever is done piously in behalf of a person is of advantage or is not of advantage when he has left the body.”⁷ In this way, Augustine dismisses the entire concept of funerary practice; using Luke 21:18 as his evidence, he claims “not even ferocious wild beasts would hinder those bodies at the time of resurrection. ‘For not a hair of their heads shall perish.’”⁸ Augustine thus makes

4 For more on Augustine's relationship to Paulinus, see: Asiedu, “The Ideal Reader,” 135, 138; Leinhard, “Friendship,” 289.

5 Lacy, intro. “The Care to be Taken of the Dead,” 349.

6 Augustine, “The Care to be Taken of the Dead,” 366.

7 Augustine, “The Care to be Taken of the Dead,” 352.

8 Augustine, “The Care to be Taken of the Dead,” 354.

clear that funerals, while pleasing to God and proper in moderation, are more for the benefit of the living than the dead: “he who has left the body can be aware of no injury to the lifeless body, nor can He who created it lose anything.”⁹

Augustine was combatting several beliefs within his own culture that he did not see as compatible with orthodox Christian values. Christian conversion had become commonplace, although scholars such as Peter Brown debate the accuracy of Augustine’s claims of mass conversion. Nevertheless, there is a clear desire throughout the middle ages to preserve the body after death, and there are likewise later stories of revenants destroying corpses to prevent the return of their enemies at the Last Judgement.¹⁰ Such stories clearly illustrate these heterodox medieval anxieties.¹¹

Augustine lived during a time where new Christians still venerated their dead pagan ancestors, and in his letter to Paulinus, we see his discomfort with venerating the ordinary dead, as he thought only saints should be commemorated.¹² Augustine shows no reticence, for example, when confronted with the story that St. Felix appeared to defend Nola “when [it] was being besieged by the barbarians,”¹³ but when it came to the appearance of ordinary souls in visions, he was much more skeptical.¹⁴ Repeatedly within the letter, Augustine stresses that even though “some dead persons are reported to have

9 Augustine, “The Care to be Taken of the Dead,” 365.

10 Such as the high medieval tale in William of Newburgh’s *Historia rerum Anglicarum* (c. 1198).

11 Joynes, *Medieval Ghost Stories*, 124.

12 Although Augustine’s work clearly makes distinctions between the ordinary dead and saints, he nevertheless allowed for the commemoration of non-Christian relatives: Rebillard, “*Nec deserere memorias suorum*,” 101; Constable, “Commemoration of the Dead,” 813; Brown, “Enjoying the Saints,” 13.

13 Augustine, “The Care to be Taken of the Dead,” 378.

14 This is an attempt to urge people away from the worship of the general dead, while maintaining the orthodox veneration of the cult of saints: Moreira, *Dreams*, 2.

appeared either in a dream or in some such fashion to the living,”¹⁵ that it is foolish to think that the dead have any more knowledge of their appearance in dreams than the living do. He uses the example that he himself had appeared in the dreams of his friend Eulogius, and yet had no knowledge of it.¹⁶ In the same vein, he discredits a tale from Milan of a son whose dead father appeared to him to uncover the location of a missing receipt of payment: “sleeping, his father told him where he might find the receipt which would acknowledge full payment of his original note.”¹⁷ Augustine claims that either the account is false, or the apparition is intercession of an angel on behalf of the dead father, and he also warns against the ever-present danger of these dreams being facilitated by demons, not angels. Throughout the letter, he leaves accounts of saints returning unchallenged.¹⁸ Ever the diplomat, he concludes “I should prefer, rather, to seek out these things from those who know.”¹⁹

Hence, in this letter, Augustine outlines his Late Antique belief that the commemoration of the dead was for the benefit of the grieving living, and that saints—brimming with divine power and licence—are in a wildly different category.²⁰ Whereas Augustine was adamant that commemoration of the dead was of no real benefit to them, and that it is only for the consolation of the living, his word was never law. In the sixth century, Gregory the Great had some exceedingly different ideas, not about a saint’s power over the living, but about the living’s power in commemorating the dead.

15 Augustine, “The Care to be Taken of the Dead,” 366.

16 Augustine, “The Care to be Taken of the Dead,” 369.

17 Augustine, “The Care to be Taken of the Dead,” 368.

18 For instance, he takes no issue with the claim that St. Felix appeared to defend the city of Nola from barbarians: Augustine, “The Care to be Taken of the Dead,” 378.

19 Augustine, “The Care to be Taken of the Dead,” 367, 380; Moreira, *Dreams*, 18.

20 Schmitt, *Ghosts*, 34; Moreira, *Dreams*, 18. In truth, the popularity of Augustine’s writings only truly took hold in earnest with the Reformation, in which Protestants began attributing almost all notion of the supernatural to the demonic: Swanson, “Ghosts and Ghostbusters,” 144.

No longer Late Antiquity, the Middle Ages had begun in earnest by Gregory's lifetime.²¹ Gregory was of Roman lineage and a monk at heart, and only begrudgingly accepted the papal throne in 590. Once there, he became known for his conversion efforts and his religious writings.²² He wrote a considerable amount about saints, pastoral care, and commentaries on the Bible; his clearest thoughts on the commemoration of the dead, however, come in the fourth and last book of his *Dialogues*. This text is a long dialogue between Gregory and his student, Peter the Deacon, and recounts the great deeds of his fellow clergy, religious brothers, and, of course, of St. Benedict of Nursia, father of the Benedictine Rule of which Gregory was so fond.²³

The *Dialogues* is full of rich material for historians of the supernatural,²⁴ as Gregory explicitly aims "to illustrate [already established] theoretical assertions of ghosts" using anecdotes and stories.²⁵ However, one tale from Gregory's own memory and lived experience stands out, in which Gregory himself exercises direct agency upon a newly dead monk, who expired not in the best of standing. And, unlike Augustine, Gregory seemed to have no qualms writing down tales about the living as having some sort of influence on the dead.²⁶ For the purposes of this paper, I will quote from a translation by Odo John Zimmerman, reprinted in 1977.²⁷

21 For more on Gregory's life and context, see: Zimmerman, intro. *Dialogues*, v.

22 Zimmerman, intro. *Dialogues*, v.

23 For more about the authenticity and authorship of Gregory's works, see: Mews, "Gregory the Great," 142; Dunn, "Gregory the Great," 238; Moorhead, "*Dialogues* Seriously," 197, 206; Wood, "Early Medieval Devotion," 1; Santo, "Gregory the Great," 421.

24 Gregory discusses many of the same points as other Church Fathers, although with differing conclusions concerning the nature of the soul, and all contribute to origins of Purgatory. For more on these topics, see: Tertullian, "Treatise on the Soul," 221, 223, 225; Augustine, "The Care to be Taken of the Dead," 367. Augustine, "The Care to be Taken of the Dead," 354, 365; Gonzalez, "Anthropologies," 482; Le Goff, *Birth of Purgatory*, 91-3.

25 Schmitt, *Ghosts in the Middle Ages*, 31. For more on the categorization of these anecdotes and miracle stories, see: Petersen, *The Dialogues*, 134; Moreira, *Dreams*, 167.

26 Lecouteux, *Return of the Dead*, 49.

27 Gregory, "Book Four," 189-275. The first three books discuss men with spiritual powers, St. Benedict, and dozens of saints, and the fourth book of *The Dialogues* alone has sixty-two chapters, far too many to reasonably discuss in detail. As such, a few illustrative examples will have to suffice.

The tale is from Gregory's time as a monk, a time for which he is full of nostalgia. He recounts the tale in the fourth and last book of his *Dialogues*, which "focuses on the single theme of a person's final hours and of the destiny of the soul after death."²⁸ The book is full of accounts both of souls departing to Heaven, as well as dying men seeing visions of ghostly entities both divine and diabolical.²⁹ His tale of Justus, is remarkable both in its detail and implications.

After telling his pupil, Peter the Deacon, about many instances of sinful people burning in either Hell or Purgatory, the young man asks with reasonable anxiety: "Is there anything at all that can possibly benefit souls after death?"³⁰ As part of his answer, Gregory tells the story of Justus, who had on occasion, been his physician. Justus had fallen deathly ill, and "Realizing that his final hour had come, Justus told his brother that he had kept three gold pieces hidden away for himself."³¹ Gregory considers this sin very grave, as it breaks the Benedictine vow of poverty, and as he had founded the monastery, it was up to him to decide what was to be done. The following was his decision:

See to it that none of the brethren visits the dying man or speaks any word of comfort to him. When Justus in his dying moments calls for any of the brethren ... inform him that the brethren will have nothing to do with him because of the three gold pieces in his possession. The bitterness of this experience at the moment of death may serve as a penitential scourge to cleanse him from the sin he had committed. After his death, do not bury him with the brethren, but, instead, cast his body into a grave dug in a manure pile. And as you throw the gold pieces into the grave after him, have all the brethren say together, "Take your money with you to perdition." So shall he be buried.³²

28 Gregory, "Book Four," 189-275.

29 Cementing faith through the use of supernatural proofs is a key component of Gregory's emphasis; he states, "anyone who is not yet solidly grounded in his faith ought to accept what his elders say:" Gregory, "Book Four," 190.

30 Gregory, "Book Four," 266.

31 Gregory, "Book Four," 267.

32 Gregory, "Book Four," 268.

This severe sentence was to impress upon the other monks the seriousness of breaking vows, but it was also to give them agency over the situation, for they prayed for Justus for thirty consecutive days, after which time, “Justus appeared to his [biological] brother Copiosus, who asked him at once why he came and how he was. ‘Up to this moment I was in misery,’ he said, ‘but now I am well, because this morning I was admitted to communion.’”³³ This had happened at the very moment the monastery had performed its thirtieth mass for him.

This story represents a great shift in how belief in ghosts and the living’s control over the dead had shifted between the time Augustine and Gregory were writing. Instead of a discussion of angels, or skepticism about the reality of Copiosus’s vision, Gregory actually uses the apparition as evidence of the righteousness of his difficult decisions as the leader of a monastery. In Gregory’s conception of his Christian world, not only can the living help the dead through their actions—such as the treatment of Justus before and after his death, the ritual desecration of his body, the dedication of masses—but it is the duty of good Christians, especially monks.

This trend continues, too, into the high Middle Ages, with writings like that of Caesarius of Heisterbach (d. 1240).³⁴ Gregory’s use of anecdotes about the supernatural to teach morality was copied, and over time evolved in new genres, such as *exempla* and *miracula*.³⁵ Cistercians, such as Caesarius, compiled these stories and used them in the same way, thus continuing the trend of using the supernatural and stories of the miraculous as didactic tools. This practice ties together the realities of performing religious actions for the dead and giving a sense of agency to the living. Caesarius’s compilation

33 Gregory, “Book Four,” 270.

34 Caesarius has received scholarly attention in recent years, but many of his anecdotes have not been treated thoroughly by historians, although they appear occasionally as part of broader quantitative studies. For such studies, see: Schmitt, *Ghosts*, 31.

35 Finucane, *Appearances of the Dead*, 44; Mula, “Cistercian *Exempla* Collections,” 903.

of over 700 morality tales, called the *Dialogues on Miracles*, even copies Gregory's dialogic structure of an older monk teaching his student. For the purposes of this research, I have used the 1929 edition, translated by H. Von Scott and C. C. Swinton Bland, but I have also consulted Joseph Strange's 1851 Latin edition where necessary to confirm accuracy.

Many of Caesarius's *exempla* are short and repetitive, but some are detailed in a way that suggests Caesarius is recording the general report of the region, and it illustrates just how integrated belief in the power of the living to benefit the dead was in the thirteenth century.³⁶ Certainly, as the translators of his work suggest, Caesarius was no fantasist: "He can be checked by contemporary documents, he has never, I believe, been convicted of more than the ordinary small lapses of memory into which we fall in recalling distant years."³⁷ This means that Caesarius's work, far from originating from within his own head or from within the walls of his monastery, was drawn from his personal experience and of second-hand accounts. However, at the same time, this world contained ghosts, angels, demons, and all manner of divine and satanic elements.³⁸ The line between accounts of the natural and unnatural, therefore, was blurry at best.

In one of his more detailed stories, Caesarius begins by telling of a certain young nobleman, who became a monk against the desires of his relative, a certain bishop.³⁹ As the bishop had no doubt feared, the youth did not fit the monastic mold, and a short time after ce-

36 Some *exempla* circulated with only vague indications from whence it originated, but others are replete with contextual detail (e.g. that a story happened to the abbot of Morimond twenty-four years prior and was related to the author by Dom Herman the abbot of Marienstatt; from Caesarius, *Dialogue on Miracles*, 1:39). This adds a sense of authorial legitimacy, but it would also entice the audience of both novice monks and laypeople with recognizable names and places: Schmitt, *Ghosts*, 124..

37 Coulton, intro. *Dialogue on Miracles*, xvii.

38 Schmitt says as much as 6.6 percent of Caesarius's 746 *exempla* involve ghosts alone, and that does not include celestial beings, or visions of Christ or the Virgin Mary, the last to which there is an entire book devoted; Schmitt, *Ghosts*, 128.

39 The text indicates that he was the relation of "a certain bishop who loved him dearly." This could be a polite way of saying that this was the bishop's illegitimate son.

menting irrevocable vows and being ordained a priest, “Under the temptation of the devil, who drove the first man out of Paradise, he forgot his vows, forgot his priesthood, and worst of all, forgot his Maker, and deserted from the [Cistercian] Order.”⁴⁰ Deserting his monastery was a damnable offense, far worse than hoarding a few gold coins, and “because he was ashamed to return to his parents, he joined a band of robbers and freebooters [or bandits].”⁴¹ As a result of his wicked deeds, he was mortally wounded. With no doctor nearby, he is convinced to confess his sins to a priest, although he did not see “what profit...confession [could] be to [him], who have wrought so many great evils.”⁴²

More in number than the sands of the sea...I robbed [men] of life itself.
My eye had pity on none. If sometimes they, touched with human pity,
were willing to spare, I, driven by wickedness of my heart, spared none
who came into my power. The wives and daughters of many I violated,
and vast numbers of homes I committed to the flames.⁴³

The priest was at a loss, and he refused to set a penance for such overwhelming sin, saying: “Your iniquity is too great for you ever to hope for pardon.”⁴⁴ But the monk-turned-bandit, had been educated in the ways of God, and declared that he should serve two thousand years in Purgatory, for “he had thought upon the greatness of his sins, and reckoned any penalty measurable by time as a mere nothing in comparison with an eternity of woe.”⁴⁵ Then he died, and the bishop was told of what had occurred.

In spite of the enormity of his sins, for two years the bishop and his entire diocese prayed diligently for the dead bandit’s soul, and twice the dead man appeared to the bishop from the afterlife. The first time

40 Caesarius, *Dialogue on Miracles*, 1:64.

41 Caesarius, *Dialogue on Miracles*, 1:64.

42 Caesarius, *Dialogue on Miracles*, 1:64.

43 Caesarius, *Dialogue on Miracles*, 1:65.

44 Caesarius, *Dialogue on Miracles*, 1:65.

45 Caesarius, *Dialogue on Miracles*, 1:65.

he appeared, a year after his death, “the dead man appeared to the bishop, pale, worn and emaciated, and clad in sad-coloured garment, plainly declaring his condition by the appearance and dress.”⁴⁶ The second time he appeared, on the second anniversary of his death, “he appeared again, but now clad in a snow-white robe [cowl], and with a countenance of tranquil serenity, and related how all his desires had been fulfilled.”⁴⁷ And so, it only took two years of diligent and consistent prayer by the living to wipe away even this bandit’s most horrendous crimes.

This amount of agency over the fate of the dead is much transformed from Augustine’s “whatever is done piously in behalf of a person is of advantage or is not of advantage when he has left the body.”⁴⁸ By Caesarius’s account, a dedicated congregation could save a soul in a fraction of the time initially allotted for punishment, no matter how wicked that soul—as long as they had repented authentically, showing true contrition.⁴⁹

In the Middle Ages, saints could heal any ailment, and bring about any measure of miracles, or punishment, whatever the case might be. Living humans in this model were, to an extent, at their mercy, and of course by extension at God’s mercy. For the ordinary dead, however, the roles were reversed. The idea was widely spread by Church fathers such as Gregory the Great, later by monks like Caesarius of Heisterbach, and even as late as the sixteenth century by mendicant preachers, that even lay Christians could effect change through

46 Caesarius, *Dialogue on Miracles*, 1:66.

47 Caesarius, *Dialogue on Miracles*, 1:67. On the topic of the color and nature of the ghost’s clothing, see: Schmitt, *Ghosts*, 203–4; Pastoureau, *Black*, 65.

48 Augustine, “The Care to be Taken of the Dead,” 352.

49 This *exemplum* comes from Caesarius’s book “Of Contrition,” and not from his book “Of the Punishment and the Glory of the Dead,” so it is clear that these categories have some degree of overlap.

ritual and prayer upon the fates of their deceased loved ones.⁵⁰ This act of commemoration and spirituality added, perhaps, a little more purpose and hope to an otherwise difficult and chaotic life. As Peter the Deacon exclaims after hearing Gregory's story about the monk Justus: "The things I hear are marvelous and most delightful."⁵¹

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⁵⁰ Whereas before the spread of Christianity, this relationship was coded as a one between the living family and the deceased ancestor, Cistercians spread instead the importance of "neighbors, people like oneself, within the framework of one's trade, the parish, the community of residents, or the zone of influence of a Mendicant monastery." In reference to the living praying for the dead, Schmitt notes that one function of *exempla* was to control the "cultural practices governing the relationship between the living and the dead": Schmitt, *Ghosts*, 126.

⁵¹ Gregory, "Book Four," 270.

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