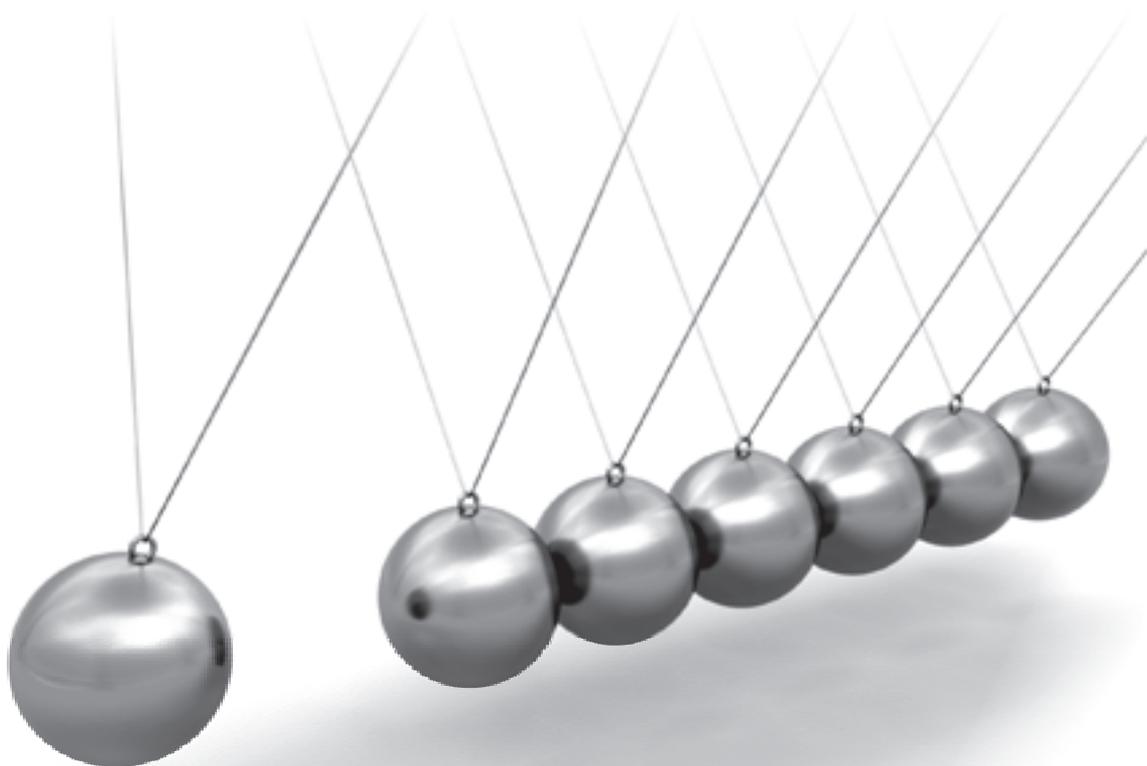


Women in Times of Crisis

Edited by Irina Deretić



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Edited by Irina Deretić

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Edited by Irina Deretić
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Dragana Dimitrijević*

ST. MONICA AS PARTICIPANT
IN ST. AUGUSTINE'S PHILOSOPHICAL
COMPANIONSHIP: A WOMAN'S VOICE
IN THE TIME OF CRISIS

Abstract: The Cassiciacum dialogues mark an important point in St. Augustine's spiritual journey from teacher of rhetoric to bishop of Hippo, and present Augustine as a Christian who had very recently found God, but was still unwilling to break off with the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition. Thus, Augustine designed his early philosophical writings in the old, classical manner. Although there is a vast body of scholarship on the Cassiciacum dialogues, only limited attention has been paid to the question of how significant a role Augustine's mother Monica plays in them. In this paper I argue that the term *philosophical-contemplative companionship*, borrowed from a new form of philosophical practice, can be applied to the participation of St. Monica in the *De beata vita*, and most likely to the Cassiciacum dialogues as a whole.

Keywords: St. Monica, St. Augustine, philosophical companionship, woman's voice

Introduction

Scholarship regarding the participation of women in ancient philosophy has been limited until recently¹. The history of the female teachers and students of philosophy – as well as the wives, sisters, daughters, and mothers of male philosophers – was a rather neglected topic (Waithe, 1989), and for a very long period of time the histories of philosophy were almost silent regarding women's enrolment in ancient philosophical

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1 A valuable contribution to the subject is Deretić's essay "Aspasia: Woman in Crises," in this volume.

schools, theories, and practices². The same is true for the conversation concerning women's involvement in theological and philosophical inquiries within the Christian communities in antiquity. On the other hand, in the last few decades there has been much conversation on negative attitudes towards women and other underprivileged groups in the ancient Christian tradition. These studies often focused on reading the ancient Christian texts with a concern for applying their content to contemporary ideologies such as feminism and sexual equality (Schüssler Fiorenza, 1999; Ehrensperger, 2004; Sugitharajah, 2008). Interest in these topics has grown in the Augustinian scholarship as well, and the work of scholars who use social-scientific methods to study the great Doctor of the Church attempts to frame his viewpoints within modern social frameworks and concepts³. Although I see all those inquiries useful, I think that there are other features in Augustine's works related to matters of gender, which have been given much less scholarly attention than they deserve, as is the case with the role of Augustine's mother Monica in his early dialogues⁴.

St. Augustine's first four extant writings, commonly referred to as the Cassiciacum dialogues, are the following: *Contra Academicos* (Against the Academics), *De beata vita* (On the Happy Life), *De ordine* (On Order)⁵, and *Soliloquia* (Soliloquies). The themes of these dialogues are the knowability of truth, human happiness, the underlying unity of reality, and self-knowledge⁶. Augustine's mother Monica is participant in two of these dialogues – the *De beata vita* and *De ordine*. Her role is more significant in

2 See, for example, Alexander (1908), Durant (1926), etc. During the 1920s Ksenija Atanasijević, the first woman who achieved an academic career in philosophy in Serbia, gives a very rare example of rereading the ancient philosophical canon and writing essays devoted to ancient Greek women philosophers (Deretić, 2020, 123–152). For a fresh view on Atanasijević's works and actions, see Petrović's essay "Dealing with a Crisis: A Note from Ksenija Atanasijević," in this volume. It is interesting to note that Ksenija Atanasijević also wrote on St. Augustine's philosophy, see Атанасијевић (2007), 508–537.

3 Against this theoretical background, some argue that Augustine thought woman to be intellectually and spiritually inferior to man. See, for example, Farley (1976) and Wolfskeel (1976). For a helpful safeguard against importing anachronistic modes of thought, see, for example, McGovan (1987). McGovan argues that St. Augustine held that all people are an *imago Dei*, and that man and woman are spiritually equal, which is Augustine's legacy to posterity.

4 One of those rare examples is Seelbach, L. (2005).

5 I take that the actual order of the first three dialogues matches to the order in which Augustine discusses them in *Retractationes* 1.1–3.

6 Despite of the importance of context and chronology for a deeper understanding of Augustine's thought, we may justly say that Augustine always gave weight to the above mentioned philosophical and theological questions.

the former, which is, accordingly, the subject of this essay, while an exploration of her role in the latter remains a desideratum.

In this paper, I argue that the term *philosophical-contemplative companionship*, borrowed from a new form of philosophical practice (Lahav, 2016), can be applied to the participation of St. Monica in the *De beata vita*, and most likely to the Cassiciacum dialogues as a whole.

A Brief Sketch of St. Monica's Life

Everything we know about St. Monica, we have learned from Augustine's works, mainly from his *Confessions*. Thus, the picture of Monica is colored by her son's pen. Although she "had no political role or influence, and ... was not even rich enough to be locally known as a civic benefactor, commemorated in her hometown by statues and inscriptions" (Clark, 2015, p. 3)⁷, Monica's portrait is one of the most documented women's portraits in late antiquity. She was born in a Christian family, "in a faithful household, which was a good member of thy Church" (*Conf.* 9.8.17)⁸, possibly of Berber origin⁹. From an early age, she took responsibilities in the family household, such as to care for younger sisters. Augustine depicts her childhood as exemplary, with the exception of the wine-guzzling episode (*Conf.* 9.8.18), which adds a human color in the otherwise almost perfect picture of Monica¹⁰. Monica left her parents' household to marry Patricius¹¹, Augustine's father, a non-Christian who was later baptized on his death-bed. By her Christian patience she won over both her mother-in-law and her husband. After the death of Patricius, Monica kept a

7 Although I have cited here the words from Clark's monograph titled *Monica: An Ordinary Saint* and found useful many insights in this book, I do not think that the title itself is appropriate, nor happily chosen.

8 Trans. Watts (1912), p. 35. The Latin words read as follows: *in domo fideli, bono membro ecclesiae tuae*. Unless stated otherwise, Latin passages and English translations from the *Confessions* are taken from Watts (1912).

9 Scholars have concluded that "Monica" is a Romanized form of "Monnica" which could connect Augustine's mother, i. e. her family to the Berber ethnic group. See, for example, Moore (2007), pp. 148–149.

10 After some harsh words from a servant, who took care of Monica and her sisters, Monica quickly changed her behavior (*Conf.* 9.8.18).

11 There is a debate over the social status of Patricius. Augustine claims that he was no more than a fairly obscure town councilor (*municipis tenuis*) at Thagaste, which implies that Augustine came from a lower-class background. On the other hand, there are modern scholars who assert that Augustine's family, having in mind the social context of the provincial town of Thagaste, cannot be viewed as poor (Shaw, 1987, p. 8).

vigilant eye on Augustine and her patient treatment of him ended with his conversion and baptism. Thus, St. Monica has been seen as a model of Christian mothers.

The End of St. Augustine's Spiritual Crisis, the Cassiciacum Dialogues and Their Historicity

In his path from teacher of rhetoric to bishop of Hippo, Augustine's *pausatio* at Cassiciacum is one of the most important milestones. In the summer of 386, after the events in the garden, described in the eighth book of his *Confessions*, Augustine started to perceive himself as a Christian. According to Nock (1933), the most important feature of conversion is its intensity in the eyes of the person who experienced it. Augustine represented his conversion as the resolution of a long emotional and spiritual crisis he experienced in his twenties. The long-lasting crisis of Augustine's spiritual identity coincides with many serious political, social, and religious crises in the Roman Empire in the last decades of the fourth century¹². Nevertheless, during that challenging period, he could rely on his mother's spiritual strength and stability. Having all that in mind, it is not surprising that Augustine perceived it as something natural to spend a lot of time with her and enjoy her company in the autumn and winter of 386 and 387, between his conversion and his baptism.

Having quit his rhetoric position in Milan, in the late summer of 386 Augustine retired to Cassiciacum, a country estate north of Milan, and, according to his own words, took with him his mother Monica, his brother Navigius, his son Adeodatus, his friend Alypius, his pupils Licentius and Trygetius, and two of his cousins. Daily practices of this nonhomogeneous group of people with very different educational backgrounds included reading Vergil¹³, reading philosophical treatises such as Cicero's *Hortensius*¹⁴, and discussions on various topics, carefully chosen by Augustine. What this period of philosophical *otium* could have meant for Augustine¹⁵? Are there interrelationships between Augustine's conversion and his withdrawing into the country to study and philosophize? Was Augustine him-

12 For a broader picture of the later Roman Empire, see, for example, Cameron (1993) and Mitchell (2007).

13 *De ord.* 1.8.26.

14 *De beata v.* 2.10, see below.

15 For a recent study on the Roman concept of *otium*, see, for example, Dimitrijević (2018).

self certain of his final departure from the *ambitio saeculi* i. e. "ambition of the world" before he set out for that country estate north of Milan? In my opinion, the Cassiciacum dialogues themselves do not offer any decisive conclusions, but one thing is certain – the role of Monica was crucial for Augustine's conversion to Christianity and we do not have reasons to doubt that she was highly supportive when he left his career, in order to devote himself fully to God.

The century-old debate as to whether the Cassiciacum dialogues were transcripts of actual conversations or literary fictions began with Rudolf Hirzel in 1895. He questioned the view that the dialogues were transcripts (Hirzel, 1895, p. 377), while two years later Ohlmann (1897) defended their historicity. Meulenbroek (1947) gave additional support to Ohlmann's arguments. O'Meara (1951) argued that the debate over the historicity of the dialogues was itself a trope, while Madec (1986) pointed out that many features found in the dialogues reflect their Ciceronian models. In the last decades scholars prefer to treat the dialogues as literary, with Foley (1999; 2003) as an exception. Interestingly enough, on a common view, Monica's participation in the dialogues has been perceived as an unimportant element in the discussion regarding their historicity. Thus, it is frequently left unmentioned, both in the articles which support the historicity of the dialogues (e. g. Foley, 2003) and in the articles which argue against it (e. g. O'Meara, 1951). For scholars interested in the historicity of the Cassiciacum dialogues, however, the question of Monica's participation should hold special interest. Why would Augustine fabricate the role of his mother in the dialogues at Cassiciacum or at least her involvement? Does the fact that she participates in the two of these dialogues give more weight to the claims that the dialogues reveal the real, historical situations or to the claims that they are merely products of Augustine's philosophic and religious interests in a key period of his life? The focus of attention in this paper is Monica's participation in the *De beata vita*, not the historicity of the Cassiciacum dialogues. Though I do not presuppose or argue for a definitive answer on this issue, it would be superficial to insist on discussing the question of Monica's participation in the Cassiciacum dialogues wholly in isolation from all other issues. It is implicit in the article's title that I think that there is not enough evidence to argue against the historicity of the dialogues. In my view, Augustine's writings and actions disclose a truly Christian mentality, unwilling and/or incapable of inventing important elements of the situations described in his works, such as the participation of Monica in his early dialogues.

St. Monica's Voice in the Dialogue *De beata vita*

The conversation regarding the role of Monica in Augustine's early dialogues started with the publication of Kolbe (1902) at the beginning of the twentieth century, but has never become too intensive, nor continuous. Kolbe's article does not contain strong claims or even a discussion supported with arguments, but rather gives an outline of all instances where Monica appears as interlocutor in Augustine's dialogues. Kolbe offers a beautiful picture of Monica, almost repeating Augustine's words, and thus commenting on Monica's intellectual abilities he says as follows: "the early writings of St. Augustine show that his mother had an exceedingly beautiful mind" (p. 520). The possible problem regarding the participation of Monica in Augustine's early dialogues arises partly from the state of the evidence – any account of Monica's philosophical and religious interests begins and ends with what Augustine has or wants to tell. Nevertheless, I believe it is fruitful to reread the parts of the dialogue *De beata vita* relevant for our topic, in order to try to reconstruct the process of facilitating dialogue.

After the dedication, Augustine's dialogue *De beata vita* reads as follows¹⁶:

Idibus Nouembribus mihi natalis dies erat. Post tam tenue prandium, ut ab eo nihil ingeniorum inpediretur, omnes, qui simul non modo illo die sed cottidie conuiuabamur, in balneas ad consedendum uocauimus; nam is tempori aptus locus secretus occurrerat. Erant autem – non enim uereor eos singulari benignitati tuae notos interim nominibus facere – in primis nostra mater, cuius meriti credo esse omne, quod uiuo, Nauigius frater meus, Trygetius et Licentius ciues et discipuli mei; nec Lartidianum et Rusticum consobrinos meos, quamuis nullum uel grammaticum passi sint, deesse uolui ipsumque eorum sensum communem ad rem, quam moliebar, necessarium putauimus. Erat etiam nobiscum aetate minimus omnium, sed cuius ingenium, si amore non fallor, magnum quiddam pollicetur, Adeodatus filius meus. (*De beata v.* 1.6)

On the Ides of November fell my birthday. After a breakfast light enough not to impede our powers of thinking, I asked all those of us who, not only that day but every day, were living together to have a congenial session in the bathing quarters, a quiet place fitting for the season. Assembled there – for without hesitation I present them to your kindness, though only by name – were first, our mother, to whose merit, in my opinion, I owe everything that I live; my brother Navigius; Trygetius and Licentius, fellow citizens and my pupils; Lastidianus and Rusticus, relatives of mine, whom I did not wish to be absent, though they are not trained even in grammar, since I believed

16 I quote the Latin text from Green's edition (1970).

their common sense was needed for the difficult matter I was undertaking. Also my son, Adeodatus the youngest of all, was with us, who promises great success, unless my love deceives me. (Trans. Schopp, 1948, p. 50–51)

In this part of my essay, I attempt to apply the notion of the philosophical-contemplative companionship, which emerged from a new form of philosophical practice (Lahav, 2016), to Augustine's dialogue *De beata vita*. Difficulties of such an application arise due to the differences between Augustine's and current historical context, as well as between the aims of Augustine's philosophical inquiries and current philosophical practice(s)¹⁷. Nonetheless, I believe there are points of convergence between them, as will be discussed further below. According to De Haas (2018), "philosophical practice, as we understand it since the 1960s, is an *encounter* (somewhere sometime) between a philosopher and one or more interlocutors who talk about a *personal existential issue* of at least one of the interlocutors" (p. 114). Philosophical practice is characterized by the following: 1) the distance from academic philosophy¹⁸, 2) the multiplicity of approaches, 3) a conversational form, 4) an outer-academic location. From these four parameters, at least three (only the second may be viewed as an exception) are applicable for Augustine's early dialogues, in particular for *De beata vita* – at Cassiciacum Augustine gathered people with very different educational backgrounds and knowledge of the history of philosophy (parameter 1); he expected from them to engage in conversation on most important philosophical issues, such as human happiness (parameter 3); the dialogue took place at the baths, i. e. "in the bathing quarters" (parameter 4), which was not an unusual place for scholarly conversation in late antiquity (Schopp, 1948, p. 50).

A true dialogue begins when Augustine asks his companions whether they want to be happy. They respond that they do, although Augustine's mother Monica quickly adds that this is not enough, thus in order to be happy, one must want only good things.

Atque ego rursus exordiens: *Beatos esse nos uolumus*, inquam. – Vix hoc effuderam, occurrerunt una uoce consentientes. – Videturne uobis, inquam, beatus esse, qui quod uult non habet? – Negauerunt. – Quid? omnis, qui quod uult habet, beatus est? – Tum mater: Si bona, inquit, uelit et habeat, beatus

17 The 13th International Conference on Philosophical Practice was organized by the University of Belgrade and Serbian Philosophical Practitioners Associations, held in Belgrade, 15–18th August, 2014.

18 On the one hand, it is not obligatory for philosophical practitioners to have an academic degree in philosophy. On the other hand, in academia, skepticism towards philosophical practice occurs very, due to the lack of methodical clarification and academic education (De Haas, 2018, 116–117).

est, si autem mala uelit, quamuis habeat, miser est. – Cui ego arridens atque gestiens: Ipsam, inquam, prorsus, mater, arcem philosophiae tenuisti. Nam tibi procul dubio uerba defuerunt, ut non sicut Tullius te modo panderes, cuius de hac sententia uerba ista sunt. Nam in *Hortensio*, quem de laude ac defensione philosophiae librum fecit: *Ecce autem, ait, non philosophi quidem, sed prompti tamen ad disputandum omnes aiunt esse beatos, qui uiuant ut ipsi uelint. Falsum id quidem; uelle enim quod non deceat, id est ipsum miserrimum. Nec tam miserum est non adipisci quod uelis, quam adipisci uelle quod non oporteat. Plus enim mali prauitas uoluntatis adfert quam fortuna cuiquam boni.* – In quibus uerbis illa sic exclamabat, ut obliti penitus sexus eius magnum aliquem uirum considerare nobiscum crederemus me interim, quantum poteram, intellegente, ex quo illa, et quam diuino fonte manarent. (2.10)

Then I spoke again: ‘We wish to be happy, do we not?’ No sooner had I said this, than they agreed, with one voice. I asked: ‘In your opinion, is a person happy who does not possess what he wants?’ They said: ‘By no means.’ ‘What? Everyone who possesses what he wants is happy?’ At this point our mother said: ‘If he wishes and possesses good things, he is happy; if he desires evil things-no matter if he possesses them – he is wretched.’ I smiled at her and said cheerfully: ‘Mother, you have really gained the mastery of the very stronghold of philosophy. For, undoubtedly you were wanting the words to express yourself like Tullius, who also has dealt with this matter. In his *Hortensius*, a book written in the praise and defense of philosophy, he said: “Behold, not the philosophers, but only people who like to argue, state that all are happy who live according to their own will. This, of course, is not true, for, to wish what is not fitting is the worst of wretchedness. But it is not so deplorable to fail of attaining what we desire as it is to wish to attain what is not proper. For, greater evil is brought about through one’s wicked wilts than happiness through fortune.” At these words our mother exclaimed in such a way that we, entirely forgetting her sex, thought we had some great man in our midst, while in the meantime I became fully aware whence and from what divine source this flowed. (Trans. Schopp, 1948, p. 55–56)

Due to the limited scope of this study, I will only confine myself to commenting on three things quoted above. First, at the beginning Augustine as facilitator encourages everyone to contribute to the dialogue by using a set of rhetorical questions (“What? Everyone who possesses what he wants is happy?”)¹⁹. The employment of rhetorical questions, particularly the question “Quid?”²⁰, shows Augustine’s desire to elicit a quick response from his companions and to add a notion of spontaneity. According to

19 The Latin sentences read as follows: “Quid? omnis, qui quod uult habet, beatus est?”

20 I have argued elsewhere that the use of the rhetorical question “Quid?” is an indicator of the colloquiality of a given Latin text (Dimitrijević, 2017). There is clear evidence that Augustine used such Latin words and idioms that were familiar to his audience. See, for example, Andoková (2019).

Augustine's narrative, his mother Monica answered his question first, and thus provided an impetus for continuing the dialogue. Furthermore, the passage cited above reveal the important difference between Augustine's early dialogues, the *De beata vita* and *De ordine* in particular, and Cicero's dialogues, which served Augustine as a model. Namely, in Cicero's philosophical dialogues there was no room for women's participation, and in that aspect Cicero's dialogues differ from Plato's dialogues as well. Augustine's debt to Marcus Tullius Cicero²¹ ("undoubtedly you were wanting the words to express yourself like Tullius") and his philosophical dialogues has been widely acknowledged²², but comparisons have focused mainly on style and rhetoric rather than content and atmosphere²³. Finally, the last sentence in the paragraph ("At these words our mother exclaimed in such a way that we, entirely forgetting her sex, thought we had some great man in our midst") shows that Augustine was fully aware that the participation of his mother Monica might look somewhat awkward to his contemporaries, and thus he chose to comment on it by using socially acceptable gender stereotypes.

Now, let us give a brief outline of Lahav's philosophical companionship, as described in Lahav (2016) and De Haas (2018b), in order to identify its similarities with Augustine's philosophical method. This new format of philosophical practice is centered on "togetherness" in a true dialogue, which consists of "thinking with each other" instead of "thinking about each other's ideas" (Lahav, 2016). The participants in Lahav's philosophical companionship are invited to contemplate on various topics and philosophical texts, chosen by Lahav, similar to Augustine's companionship. The main aim of Lahav's companionships is the searching for questions (Lahav, 2016), while Augustine's early dialogues could be conceived as an enterprise in searching for answers. Lahav intends to be a philosophical midwife, like Socrates, thus his main aim is to support others to discover their own thoughts and experiences, which is similar to Augustine's approach, as illustrated in the passage quoted above. Being maieutic philosophers, both Augustine and Lahav turn their attention towards their companions. However, the fact that Lahav has built the concept of philosophical companionship might suggest that he is inclined to stay in

21 Cicero's writings were held up as models throughout the antiquity and beyond. For a short account on Cicero's letters as a model for Pliny the Younger, see, for example, Dimitrijević (2006).

22 In his *Confessiones* Augustine had only positive things to say about Cicero's dialogue *Hortensius*, and credited the encounter with this book as beginning the journey that led to his conversion to Christianity. Unfortunately, the *Hortensius* is now lost and thus the above passage is of great importance.

23 It has been wisely pointed out in Foley (2003).

his own thoughts and principles (De Haas, 2018b). Thus, the words of his companions might be reduced to his themes and philosophical track. Unlike Lahav, Augustine showed himself as eager to leave behind his train of thought and to underline Monica's philosophical, i. e. spiritual superiority.

Concluding Remarks

To suppose that the issue of St. Monica's participation in St. Augustine's early dialogues can be settled beyond dispute would be naïve – the dialogues themselves yield interpretations, not proofs. While my reading of the *De beata vita* is admittedly interpretive, it addresses the question which has been often passed over in Augustinian scholarship. If this paper may contribute anything to a better understanding of the Cassiciacum dialogues and their context, it would be a fuller recognition of the importance of Monica's role in the resolution of Augustine's spiritual crisis, and its implications for a fuller appreciation of St. Augustine as great Christian philosopher. If Augustine favored his mother's voice in important questions, such as the conditions for human happiness, would it be fair to accuse him of being anti-woman or even misogynist? Does the fact that Monica had been given a voice in Augustine's early dialogues not imply, among other things, that he did not think woman to be spiritually and/or intellectually inferior to man? I think it certainly does. Thus, this paper may be viewed as a small contribution to some broader issues, including St. Augustine's philosophical anthropology, which has proven to be especially formative for not only Christian thought, but for philosophical thought in general²⁴, and has generated an enormous discussion since its conception more than sixteen centuries ago²⁵.

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24 For example, it is widely agreed that St. Anselm was influenced by Augustine in many ways, and the twenty-first century has witnessed a resurgence of interest in the Anselm's so-called ontological argument, both positive and negative. For a new refutation of Gasking's parody of Anselm's ontological argument, see Prelević (2018).

25 I wish to thank several friends and colleagues for helpful comments and stimulating conversations on various aspects of this paper: in particular, Vessela Valiavitcharska-Marcum, Irina Deretić, Kosta Simić and Uroš Rajčević.

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Драгана Димитријевић*

**СВ. МОНИКА КАО УЧЕСНИЦА У
ФИЛОЗОФСКОМ КРУЖОКУ СВ. АВГУСТИНА:
ЖЕНСКИ ГЛАС У ВРЕМЕ КРИЗЕ**

Апстракт: Дијалози у Касићијаку означавају важну станицу на духовном путу Св. Августина од учитеља реторике до епископа Хипона, и приказују га као хришћанина који је непосредно пре тога пронашао Бога, али још увек није био спреман да напусти грчко-римску филозофску традицију. Тако је Августин скројио своје ране филозофске списе по устаљеном, класичном моделу. Иако постоји много радова о дијалозима у Касићијаку, веома ограничен број је посвећен питању колико је значајну улогу у њима имала Августина мајка Моника. У овом раду износим аргументе у прилог тези да термин *филозофско-контемплативној кружока* ("philosophical-contemplative companionship"), позајмљен из нове форме филозофске праксе, може да се примени на Моничино учествовање у дијалогу *De beata vita*, те врло вероватно и на дијалоге у Касићијаку у целини.

Кључне речи: Св. Моника, Св. Августин, филозофски кружок, женски глас

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