

ST AUGUSTINE'S CITY OF GOD

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OF GOD ▸ A VIEW OF THE
CONTENTS ▸ *By* JOSEPH RICKABY, S.J.

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St. Augustine's City of God
A View of the Contents
By Rickaby, Joseph, S. J.
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IN A.D. 410 Rome was taken and sacked, not destroyed, by Alaric the Goth. The fall of the Eternal City filled the civilised world with consternation. For a century, since Constantine, the Emperors, except Julian, had been Christian. Paganism had been repressed by law; and though pagans still were numerous, especially in the educated classes, the Empire on the whole wore a fair semblance of a Christian State. Then the catastrophe, long threatened, had come at last. Barbarism had triumphed. Whose fault was it? It was obvious to say that it was all along of Christianity. Century after century there had been of victorious paganism: one century of Christianity had brought decadence and ruin.

To meet this reproach, St Augustine took up his pen in 412, and began the work that we know as *The City of God*. Year by year it grew, filling up such leisure as episcopal administration and polemics allowed. It was like one of those large houses that are built by addition of room to room and block to block, as occasion requires, not without a plan, but on a plan comprehensive and discursive. Indeed, I had almost said that *The City of God* was St Augustine's *scrapbook* for fifteen years, A.D. 412-427. It was originally dedicated to Marcellinus, Imperial Vicar of Africa, who was slain in September, 413 (see St Augustine's Letters 136, 138, 151). By 415 the "books," or main divisions of the work, had grown to five (Letter 169); there were eleven in 416; fourteen in 420; and the whole was finished in 427, the remarkable year in which St Augustine

penned his crowning treatise on Predestination, *De correptione et gratia*, three years before his death.

This is St Augustine's own account of the work, in the second book of his *Retractations*:

Meanwhile Rome was overthrown by a raid of Goths, led by King Alaric, a most destructive invasion. The polytheistic worshippers of false gods, whom we commonly call "pagans,"¹ endeavoured to bring this overthrow home to the Christian religion, and began to blaspheme the true God with unusual sharpness and bitterness. This set me on fire with zeal for the house of God, and I commenced to write the books *Of the City of God* against their blasphemies or errors. This work occupied me for a number of years, owing to numerous interruptions of businesses that would not brook delay and had a prior claim on me. At last this large work *Of the City of God* was brought to a conclusion in twenty-two books. The first five of them are a refutation of their position who maintain that the worship of many gods, according to the custom of paganism, is essential to the prosperity of human society, and that the prohibition of it is the source and origin of calamities such as the fall of Rome. The next five books are against those who, while allowing that such calamities are never wanting, and never will be wanting, to the page of mortal history, and are now great, now small, under varying conditions of place, time, and person, yet argue that polytheistic worship, and sacrifice to many gods, is profitable for the life that follows after death. These first ten books, then, are a refutation of these two vain opinions adverse to the Christian religion. But not to expose ourselves to the reproach of merely having refuted the other side without establishing our own position, we have made that assertion of our own position the object of the second part of this work, which comprises twelve books; though, to be sure, in the former ten, where needful, we vindicate our own, and in the latter twelve we confute the opposite party. Of the twelve following books, four contain the origin of the Two Cities, the one of God, the other of this world. The next four contain the course of their

¹ *Pagan, paganus* (from *pagus*, a country place), originally meant *civilian*. It appears that the military class, and all other persons who had employment under Government, were the more amenable to imperial influence exerted in favour of Christianity.

history; the third and last four their several due ends. Thus the whole twenty books, though written of Two Cities, yet take their title from the better of the two, and are entitled by preference *Of the City of God*.

Every great work, in so far as it is a work of man, is open to criticism. This of St Augustine lies open to the criticism that the Two Cities are not organised as cities. The City of this world, called Babylon, "the city of confusion," is not organised at all. There is no one systematic coalition of all bad men against the good. Indeed, it is often hard to distinguish who the bad men are. The bad are by no means bad all over, and there is much evil among the good. In this life there is no *great gulf fixed* (Luke xvi 26) between the good and the bad. St Augustine's dichotomy is too absolute. It may be replied that some men are in the state of sanctifying grace and some are out of it; and that is a great gulf. Again, that some men are elect, others reprobate—again a great gulf. These are gulfs, indeed, but not apparent gulfs; our eyes cannot discern with any certainty the elect from the reprobate, nor see the soul in grace. A city is a visible, organised construction: the elect and reprobate on earth are not thus two cities. The Catholic Church is such a city, a visible organism. But the Catholic Church has existed only for nineteen hundred years, whereas St Augustine dates his City of God from the earliest days of man on earth. His Two Cities, then, cannot be accurately described as the Church and the World. Once more, I say, the World is not an organised body, organised for the damnation of mankind, as the Church is organised for their salvation.

In fact, the Two Cities are not the Church and the World, but the Elect and the Reprobate. This St Augustine lays down clearly:

We distribute the human race into two kinds of men, one living according to man, the other living according to God.

Mystically, we call them Two Cities, or two societies of men: the one of which is predestined to reign eternally with God, the other to suffer eternal punishment with the devil (*G. D.*, xv, 1).

The Elect and the Reprobate do not form two visible societies on earth. To identify the Church on earth with the Elect would be a gross piece of Jansenism, such as Clement XI, in his Bull *Unigenitus*, condemned in condemning the following propositions of Paschal Quesnel—No. 72: "It is a note of the Christian Church that it is Catholic, comprising at once all the angels of heaven, and all the elect and just of earth, and of all ages." No. 74: "The Church, or the whole Christ, has the Word Incarnate for Head, and all the saints as members." No. 76: "Nothing more roomy than the Church of God, because all the elect and righteous of all ages compose it."

Nothing could be more anti-Augustinian than such teaching. The cardinal point that St Augustine continually pressed against the Donatists was precisely this, that elect and reprobate live side by side and together make up the Church on earth, the Church being the net of the parable (Matt. xiii 47-8) taking *fishes good and bad*.

Consider St Augustine himself in the days of his sinful youth, which he has recorded in his *Confessions*. He was certainly one of the Elect, but to which City did he belong in those days, to Babylon or to Jerusalem? At this hour there are many of the Elect living like reprobates: there are doubtless also reprobates living at present the life of the Elect. To which City do they severally belong? These Two Cities are blended together in this world, till they are parted at the Last Judgement (*C. D.*, i, 35).

The Catholic Church, indeed, stands as a city on a mountain, distinct and clear in its royal proportions, a clear mark for the hostility of the world. But elect and repro-

bate are intermixed on earth, and God's eye alone infallibly distinguishes them.

St Augustine furnishes this general differentiation of the Two Cities:

These Two Cities are made by two loves: the earthly City by love of oneself even to contempt of God; the heavenly City by love of God even to contempt of oneself. The one glories in itself, the other glories in God. The one seeks glory from men; to the other, God, witness of conscience, is its greatest glory. The one lifts up its head in its own glory: the other says to its God (Ps. iii 3), *my glory and the lifter up of my head* (*De Civitate Dei*, xiv, 28).

A Catholic, reading *The City of God*, is likely to encounter sundry things that he will disagree with. He may then apply to St Augustine what St Augustine says, writing to St Jerome: "Only to the canonical books of Scripture have I learnt to pay such awe and honour as to believe most firmly that no author of them has erred at all in his writing; but in reading other writers, however distinguished for holiness and learning, I never take a thing for true simply because it is their opinion; nor do I suppose that you would have your books read like the books of the prophets and apostles" (Letter 82). Much erudition has come to hand, and the outlook of the human mind has changed vastly, in the fifteen centuries since Augustine wrote. *The City of God* is in many respects an antiquated book. But its main line of thought is not antiquated. As a mirror of Catholic faith, as a view of the world from a Christian standpoint, it remains to this day exactly as St Augustine wrote it. St Augustine's Two Cities, Jerusalem and Babylon, reappear in St Ignatius's Two Standards. We recognise still Satan's throne of fire and smoke, and his vamping up of riches and worldly glory, culminating in huge pride; and the opposite attitude of Christ our Saviour, with his gospel of poverty and humility. Such teaching is of the essence of Christianity, and that

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does not change. The tone and ethos of *The City of God* is the ethos of the Church and of the true Christian to this day. In that sense *The City of God* is an immortal work.

It will now be our care to go over the salient points of the twenty-two books.

POSTSCRIPTUM

Since this little outline was all written, a new stimulus has been given to the study of St Augustine by a splendid edition of the Latin text, *St Augustine's De Civitate Dei, with Introduction and Appendices*, by J. E. G. Welldon, D.D., Dean of Durham (London, S.P.C.K., 2 vols., 42s. net, 1924). It will be seen that I am in some disagreement with the Dean on the point of Sacrifice.

BOOK I

The right glorious City of God. St Augustine opens with these words. He had in mind to comfort himself for the fall of Rome the "Eternal City," with whose prosperity the very existence of human society seemed bound up. For the first time in her history, since she had attained to empire, Rome had come into the power of a foreign invader. Always a loyal citizen, Augustine was filled with grief and horror. He found comfort with St Paul: *we have not here a lasting city, but seek that which is to come* (Heb. xiii 14), and is even now, however imperfectly, on earth. He set this city, the *heavenly Jerusalem* (Gal. iv 26; Apoc. xxi 10), over against *Babylon*, pagan Rome (Apoc. xvii 5). For Rome, notwithstanding her recent Christianity, still stood for paganism. Her glories were those of a pagan city: she was saturated still with the paganism of centuries; many of her nobility remained pagan; pagan superstitions had still a great hold on her people. And pagans blamed Christianity for her fall.

Rome was not destroyed by Alaric. He plundered the city, slew many of the people, then evacuated it, leaving the buildings but little injured. The closest parallel to the catastrophe of 410 is to be found in 1529, when Rome was captured and plundered, and torrents of blood shed in her streets by the army of Charles V, under the Constable de Bourbon. De Bourbon seems to have done about as much damage as Alaric, or even more. Alaric, himself a Christian, spared the lives of all who took refuge in the churches: his soldiers even conducted people there to ensure their safety (*G. D.*, i, 1).

"And yet," writes Augustine, a patriot and a prophet;

"The Roman Empire has suffered a shock rather than a subversion, an experience that has befallen Rome at other times ere Christ's name was preached. From those previous shocks she recovered, nor in these our days are we to despair of her recovery. For who knows the will of God in this concern?" (*C. D.*, iv, 7).

Taking up the doctrine of *Eccles.* ix 1, 2, St Augustine observes how the good and evil things of this life are distributed pretty indiscriminately to good and evil men (i, 8). The good may sometimes deserve to share the earthly punishment of the wicked, inasmuch as through false shame and complaisance they have neglected to rebuke the evil going on around them (c. 9). Even so, what the good suffer, all turns to their good (*Rom.* viii 20). What though many Christian bodies went unburied? The pomp of a funeral is more for the comfort of the living than for the benefit of the dead. A good Christian can dispense with it; his resurrection to glory is secure anyhow. And yet, so far as in us lies, we should reverently consign to earth those bodies that have been the organs of the Holy Ghost (cc. 12, 13).

In cc. 16-18 St Augustine meets the taunt that God suffered Christian women to be violated by the barbarians in Alaric's train. He gives an answer, which ever since has been taken for final in the Church, that even in that hard case it would be wrong for a woman to save her honour by taking her own life. The violence is entirely the sin of the doer; the sufferer is innocent; her virginity before God is intact. "As long as the purpose of the mind holds firm, which is the sanctification also of the body, even the body does not lose its holiness by the violence of another's lust, but the steady will of continence in the mind keeps the body holy." Suicide is always sinful, and sin is not to be avoided by sin. Some martyrs, indeed, have so taken their own lives; of these Augustine writes: "I dare not pronounce any hasty judgement on

these cases " (c. 26). A modern Lucretia would be warned by her confessor not to copy that pagan example: for Lucretia, see cap. 19.

The Romans distinguished *ludi scenici*, stage-plays, from *ludi circenses*, which were more like our menagerie and circus shows. The *ludi circenses* were horribly wasteful of human life in the combats of gladiators, and of men, and even women, exposed to wild beasts. Of them, however, Augustine has little to say. The advent of Christian emperors had mitigated, if not abolished, such cruelties. But the *ludi scenici* went on at Rome and in the provincial cities. Augustine in his unbridled youth witnessed them at Carthage. In *The City of God* he recurs to them again and again with horror. We have extant specimens of them in the plays of Plautus and Terence. Those plays are coarse enough; but of them St Augustine writes: "These are the more tolerable forms of stage-plays, tragedies and comedies, that is, fables of the poets for theatrical representation, involving in their composition much coarseness of theme, but anyhow free from obscenity of language, so that in the course of what are called high-class and liberal studies boys are compelled by their elders to read and study these plays" (*C. D.*, ii, 8). But, as actually staged, the plays were far worse both at Rome and Athens. They were nothing less than immodest pantomimes. "How shall I tell that man to love God, who still loves the mimic, still loves the pantomime?" asks St Augustine (*Enarr. in ps.* 36). St John Chrysostom is equally emphatic, e.g. *hom.* 28 in 1 *Cor.* The misery of it all was that these obscenities were exhibited in the name of religion. Stage-plays were first introduced at Rome to avert the divine anger in a pestilence (*C. D.*, i, 32; Livy, vii; Valerius Maximus, ii, 4). The Pontifex Maximus, Scipio Nasica, held in his day to be the best man in Rome, was so disgusted with them that he persuaded the Senate to stop the building of a theatre (i, 31).