

THE CITY OF GOD

by

SAINT AUGUSTINE

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With an Introduction by THOMAS MERTON



THE MODERN LIBRARY
NEW YORK

INTRODUCTION

BY THOMAS MERTON

Here is a book that was written over fifteen hundred years ago by a mystic in North Africa. Yet to those who have ears to hear, it has a great deal to say to many of us who are not mystics, today, in America. *The City of God* is a monumental theology of history. It grew out of St. Augustine's meditations on the fall of the Roman Empire. But his analysis is timeless and universal. That is to say, it is Catholic in the etymological sense of the word. It is also Catholic in the sense that St. Augustine's view of history is the view held by the Catholic Church, and by all Catholic tradition since the Apostles. It is a theology of history built on revelation, developed above all from the inspired pages of St. Paul's Epistles and St. John's Apocalypse.

To those who do not know St. Augustine, the figure of the great Bishop of Hippo (the modern name of the city is Bona) may seem quite remote. And to one who attempts to make his first acquaintance with Augustine by starting to read *The City of God* from the beginning without a guide, the saint may remain an unappealing personality and his book may appear to be nothing more than a maze of curious, ancient fancies.

St. Augustine began to write this book three years after Rome first collapsed and opened its gates to a barbarian invader. Alaric and his Goths sacked the city in 410. Rome had been the inviolate mistress of the world for a thousand years. The fall of the city that some had thought would stand forever demoralized what was left of the civilized world. Those who still took the pagan gods seriously—and it seems they were not a few—looked about them for a scapegoat upon which to lay the guilt for this catastrophe. The Christians had emerged from the catacombs and had been officially recognized by the convert Emperor Constantine. Nevertheless Christianity remained the object of superstitious fear on the part of many, and it was inevitable that the

bad luck that had befallen the Empire should be blamed on the Catholic Church. St. Augustine took up his pen in 413 and set about proving the absurdity of such a charge. This furnished him with the subject matter for the first ten books of *The City of God*—a work that was written slowly, and appeared in instalments over a period of thirteen years. But the topic that first engaged his attention—Christianity versus the official pagan religion of imperial Rome—is not one that will strike us, today, as a living issue. Nor was it altogether worthy of the genius of Augustine. After several years of writing he abandoned this aspect of the problem, and left it to be disposed of by a certain Orosius, who will probably never find his way into the catalogue of the Modern Library. We owe him at least a debt of gratitude for having set Augustine free to write about the problem that really interested him: the theology of the “two cities” and of the intervention of God in human history.

The saint does not settle down to treat the real theme of his work until he reaches Book Eleven. And even then, he takes such a broad view of his subject that his approach to the main point seems to us extraordinarily unhurried. He pauses to solve many questions of detail. He embarks on a historical exegesis of the Old and New Testaments in order to show how the “two cities” have entered into the very substance of sacred history. Finally he completes this extraordinary panorama with a view of the final end of the two cities, and of their respective fates in eternity. How many Americans will have the patience to follow him through all of this? Those who do so will certainly find themselves profoundly changed by the experience, because they will have been exposed to a summary of Christian dogma. It is an exposition that can only be fully appreciated if it is read in the spirit in which it was written. And *The City of God* is an exposition of dogma that was not only written but *lived*.

What do we mean when we say that Augustine lived the theology that he wrote? Are we implying, for instance, that other theologians have not lived up to their principles? No. That possibility is not what concerns us here. It is more than a question of setting down on paper a series of abstract principles and then applying them in practice. Christianity is more than a moral code, more than a philosophy, more than a system of rites. Although it is sufficient, in the abstract, to divide the Catholic religion into three aspects and call them creed, code and cult, yet in practice, the integral Christian life is something far more than all this. It is more than a belief; it is a *life*. That is to say, it is a belief that is lived and experienced and expressed in action. The action in which it is expressed, experienced and lived is called a mystery. This mystery is the sacred drama which keeps ever present in history

the Sacrifice that was once consummated by Christ on Calvary. In plain words—if you can accept them as plain—Christianity is the life and death and resurrection of Christ going on day after day in the souls of individual men and in the heart of society.

It is this Christ-life, this incorporation into the Body of Christ, this union with His death and resurrection as a matter of conscious experience, that St. Augustine wrote of in his *Confessions*. But Augustine not only experienced the reality of Christ living in his own soul. He was just as keenly aware of the presence and action, the Birth, Sacrifice, Death and Resurrection of the Mystical Christ in the midst of human society. And this experience, this vision, if you would call it that, qualified him to write a book that was to be, in fact, the autobiography of the Catholic Church. That is what *The City of God* is. Just as truly as the *Confessions* are the autobiography of St. Augustine, *The City of God* is the autobiography of the Church written by the most Catholic of her great saints.

That is the substance of the book. But how is the average modern American going to get at that substance? Evidently, the treatment of the theme is so leisurely and so meandering and so diffuse that *The City of God*, more than any other book, requires an introduction. The best we can do here is to offer a few practical suggestions as to how to tackle it.

The first of these suggestions is this: since, after all, *The City of God* reflects much of St. Augustine's own personality and is colored by it, the reader who has never met Augustine before ought to go first of all to the *Confessions*. Once he gets to know the saint, he will be better able to understand Augustine's view of society. Then, no one who is not a specialist, with a good background of history or of theology or of philosophy, ought not to attempt to read the *City*, for the first time, beginning at page one. The living heart of the *City* is found in Book Nineteen, and this is the section that will make the most immediate appeal to us today because it is concerned with the theology of peace. However, Book Nineteen cannot be understood all by itself. The best source for solutions to the most pressing problems it will raise is Book Fourteen, where the origin of the two Cities is sketched, in an essay on original sin. Finally, the last Book (Twenty-two), which is perhaps the finest of them all, and a fitting climax to the whole work, will give the reader a broad view of St. Augustine's whole scheme because it describes the end of the City of God, the communal vision of the elect in Paradise, the contemplation which is the life of the "City of Vision" in heaven and the whole purpose of man's creation.

It may come as a surprise to some to learn that St. Augustine quite

spontaneously regarded contemplation as a communal endeavor. Solitude may be necessary for certain degrees of contemplative prayer on earth, but in heaven contemplation is the beatitude not merely of separate individuals but of an entire city. That city is a living organism whose mind is the Truth of God and whose will is His Love and His Liberty.

God created Adam as a pure contemplative. Material creation was subject to Adam's reason, and the soul of Adam was perfectly subjected to God. United to God in a very high degree of vision and love, Adam would have transmitted to all mankind his own perfection, his own liberty, his own peace in the vision of God. In Adam all men were to be, as it were, "one contemplative" perfectly united to one another in their one vision and love of the One Truth.

Original sin, an act of spiritual apostasy from the contemplative vision and love of God, severed the union with God that depended on the subjection of Adam's will to the will of God. Since God is Truth, Adam's apostasy from Him was a fall into falsehood, unreality. Since God is unity, Adam's fall was a collapse into division and disharmony. All mankind fell from God in Adam. And just as Adam's soul was divided against itself by sin, so all men were divided against one another by selfishness. The envy of Cain, which would have been impossible in Eden, bred murder in a world where each self-centered individual had become his own little god, his own judge and standard of good and evil, falsity and truth.

St. Augustine traces the history of this divided city of conflict and hate through all history from the fall of Adam to the end of time and even into eternity. But at the same time he contemplates and exposes to our gaze the history of that other City, planned by God to repair the work that Adam's sin could not be allowed to ruin. It was in the "new Adam," Christ, that man was to be raised again to the friendship and vision of God—not indeed the contemplation Adam had enjoyed in Eden, still less the clear vision of beatitude: but heaven was to begin on earth in faith and charity. God would be "seen" but only in darkness and man would be united in "one Body" but only at the cost of struggle and self-sacrifice. The whole of history since the ascension of Jesus into heaven is concerned with one work only: the building and perfecting of this "City of God." Even the wars, persecutions, and all the other evils which have made the history of empires terrible to read and more terrible to live through, have had only this one purpose: they have been the flails with which God has separated the wheat from the chaff, the elect from the damned. They have been the tools that have fashioned the living stones which God would set in the walls of His city of vision.

The difference between the two cities is the difference between two loves. Those who are united in the City of God are united by the love of God and of one another in God. Those who belong to the other city are indeed not united in any real sense: but it can be said that they have one thing in common besides their opposition to God: each one of them is intent on the love of himself above all else. In St. Augustine's classical expression: "These two cities were made by two loves: the earthly city by the love of self unto the contempt of God, and the heavenly city by the love of God unto the contempt of self." (Bk. 14, c. 28.) The earthly city glories in its own power, the heavenly in the power of God.

But there is a deeper psychological explanation of these two loves and of the way they contribute to the formation of two distinct societies. The love which unites the citizens of the heavenly city is disinterested love, or charity. The other city is built on selfish love, or cupidity. Now there are two reasons why only one of these loves—^{love}charity—can serve as the foundation for a happy and peaceful commonwealth. The first reason is metaphysical: charity is a love that leads the will to the possession of true values because it sees all things in their right order. It sees creatures for what they are, means to the possession of God. It uses them only as means and thus arrives successfully at the end, which is God. But cupidity is doomed from the start to frustration because it is based on a false system of values. It takes created things for ends in themselves, which they are not. The will that seeks rest in creatures for their own sake stops on the way to its true end, terminates in a value which does not exist, and thus frustrates all its deepest capacities for happiness and peace. The second reason is psychological and moral. Those who love God love a supreme and infinite good that cannot be diminished by being shared. Those who place their hopes on the possession of created and limited goods are doomed to conflict with one another and to everlasting fear of losing whatever they may have gained. Hence the city that is united in charity will be the only one to possess true peace, because it is the only one that conforms to the true order of things, the order established by God. The city that is united merely by an alliance of temporal interests cannot promise itself more than a temporary cessation from hostilities and its order will never be anything but a makeshift.

St. Augustine has left us a famous illustration of the way the citizens of the heavenly city are united in their knowledge and love of God. At the beginning of his *De Doctrina Christiana* he calls to mind the audience in a Roman theater. He shows us the spectators, coming together, strangers, from different places, to sit and watch the play. Soon

one of the actors begins to arouse the admiration of individuals. They like him and they begin to applaud. Then, finding their own enthusiasm reproduced in others, they "begin to love one another for the sake of him that they love." A bond is established; they begin to encourage one another in applauding their favorite. Anyone who has been to the opera in a large Italian city will appreciate St. Augustine's description. The enthusiasm spreads through the crowd, and a "society" is spontaneously generated by this common bond of love for a common object of contemplation. At the same time, those who do not share this admiration and love are, by that very fact, excluded and divided off into another, contrary society. So it is with the two cities of heaven and earth. Their two loves divide them beyond reconciliation. They are traveling in opposite directions and thus it is impossible that their roads should ever reach the same term.

Nevertheless, the fact that the two cities are opposed to one another does not mean that they cannot peacefully co-exist here on earth. It is not impossible that they should agree upon a *modus vivendi*. They can come to terms, and it is well that they should do so. The temporal advantage of worldly society is well served when the citizens of heaven still living in the world are protected by the temporal power. And although the Church as a whole can only profit by persecution, nevertheless temporal peace is a greater blessing, and one to be prayed and worked for, since it provides the normal condition under which most men can safely expect to work out their eternal destiny.

Was St. Augustine planning a temporal theocracy, a Holy Roman Empire in *The City of God*? It is abundantly clear that the City he described is the Kingdom of Christ which, as Jesus told Pilate, is "not of this world." Nevertheless, that does not mean that Augustine would necessarily have frowned upon a temporal theocracy. But it certainly entitles us to suppose that he would not have placed very high hopes in one.

The real value of this book, then, is not to be found in the help it may offer in solving immediate problems of policy in the world. What it offers us is something far more important. It opens our eyes to the deep and vital view of history which is the Christian and mystical view, the vision of St. Paul and of the Evangelists who knew that Christ had come into the world to "draw all things to Himself" (John 12:32) and who saw that "all things worked together for the good of them that love God" (Romans 8:28) because all the good and evil of history, all the prosperity and adversity which come upon the saints in this life serve only to forward the growth of the Mystical Christ "unto a perfect man and unto the measure of the age of the fulness of Christ" (Ephesians

4:13). This eschatological view of history contemplates with joy the running out of the sands of time and looks forward with gladness to the Last Day that will make manifest the full and final glory of the "Whole Christ." *The City of God*, for those who can understand it, contains the secret of death and life, war and peace, hell and heaven.

Abbey of Gethsemani

January 4, 1950.