

## THE AUTHORITY OF ST AUGUSTINE

DOM DESMOND SCHLEGEL, O.S.B.

**I**N his 'Traité des Études Monastiques'<sup>1</sup> Dom Jean Mabillon quotes with evident approval the opinion of a contemporary writer that whereas all the Greek Fathers are summed up in St John Chrysostom so all the Latin Fathers can truly be said to be contained in St Augustine. From the year 431 when Pope Celestine I sang the praises of Augustine in his well-known letter to the bishops of Gaul,<sup>2</sup> the teaching Church has not ceased to recommend in an altogether exceptional way his writings and doctrine.

Of course it is in the realm of divine grace that his authority is pre-eminent, but it would be inexact to confine his influence within such a limit. He is *the* Father of the Western Church, bridging the gulf between the old and the new; providing us with a summary of what had been thought out by his predecessors, and preparing the way for the great medieval development which was to follow. Living his life about midway between the councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon—probably the most vigorous period of the Church's history—he brought to bear on Christian revelation the elements of pagan philosophy which his powerful and essentially courageous mind had duly assimilated.

With Pelagianism in the fourth century something new appeared. It was almost as if the growing distance between then and the time of our Lord called for an increased self-reliance in him who would follow Christ, in order to bridge the gap. St Augustine, ever strongly aware of God's transcendence and of man's impotence before it, opposed and crushed this mistaken self-confidence by insisting on the exclusive omnipotence of love in grace. It was during his years as bishop, between 396 and 430, that Augustine gave expression to the fulness of his thought on this question and that he became for posterity *Doctor Gratiae* and *Doctor Caritatis*.

His letters of this period allow us to penetrate deep down into his very soul. Force of circumstance obliged him to pen a great

<sup>1</sup> Brussels, 1692, p. 248.

<sup>2</sup> Ep. 'Apostolici verba praecepti', 21.

number: two hundred and twenty-three, to be exact. He knew everyone, and everyone knew him. Bishops and priests (as often as not heretical ones), layfolk too, pagan as well as Christian, he counts among his friends; and to all, whether they asked his opinion on some point of theology or philosophy, or his advice on the ordering of their lives, the already over-worked bishop would reply, sometimes at considerable length. Some of his letters on the Donatist question, for instance, exceed the usual limits of a correspondence and are more like treatises. Nothing is too much trouble, no question of importance to his correspondent is unimportant for him. From clearing up problems concerned with the mystery of the Trinity to his prudent care with regard to a mixed marriage,<sup>3</sup> the same charity, the same kindness is always in evidence. To write letters was, for Augustine, one of the duties of his ministry. In his correspondence, as in his preaching, he is first and foremost the Bishop of Hippo.

A considerable number of these letters, it is to our purpose to note, were addressed to the Roman Bishop. Relations between North Africa and the capital of the Christian world were continual, and the popes never ceased to take a close interest in African affairs. In the Pelagian controversy, for example, Augustine is careful that his opinion be backed by the authority of the Apostolic See.

The Donatist party took up a lot of Augustine's time, and his dealings with them gave him the opportunity to explain Catholic teaching on the Church, and the place therein of the Roman primacy. But here again the pastor of souls with a practical object in view can be seen as much as, or more than, the speculative theologian. His last letter on the subject is written to a converted nun, urging her 'not to forsake the Church because she was distressed at scandals which arose among its members; for the Church will not be perfectly holy until the last judgment shall have separated the wicked from among the righteous'.<sup>4</sup>

However, in spite of what may be called the occasional character of much of his writing, Augustine could, and did, expound as fully as any the cardinal doctrines of Christianity, and it is precisely when talking about the Church that he makes what is perhaps his most original contribution to Catholic theology.

<sup>3</sup> Ep. 252-5.

<sup>4</sup> G. G. Willis, *St Augustine and the Donatist Controversy*, p. 86.

In Augustine's manner of proposing the doctrine of the mystical body, great prominence is given to interior realities, such as the life of Christ within the soul, and the union, likewise interior, of each soul with all other souls and with the Church. He is one of the most outspoken on the subject of our incorporation in Christ. For him it is a fundamental principle that Christ and the Church are one: the Church is the body of which Christ is the head. '*Unus ergo homo Christus caput et corpus. Quod est corpus eius? Ecclesia eius.*'<sup>5</sup> The first mark of the Church is therefore unity: not only that there is only one true Church, but that within that Church itself union, unity, must reign supreme—and whoever cuts himself off from that unity is *ipso facto* outside the Church. The 'coat without seam' must not be rent, but preserved intact by charity. It is possible to conceive of a faith pure and whole even in schism, but not of such a faith which lives by charity.

St Cyprian's doctrine of ecclesiastical unity and of the mystical body was continued and completed by Augustine. He follows him in seeing in Peter and his successors the representative of that unity; by communion with the Apostolic See one is in contact with the Apostles: one is in the true Church.<sup>6</sup> He teaches a doctrine of unity, a vast unity, that embraces all men, even sinners, and all virtue, even that which appears to flourish outside the Church. The point that he 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. 13, 47) which 'enclosed fish of every kind at once'.

His great work, the most elaborate, and in some respects the most significant that came from his pen, *The City of God*, has for its theme the Catholic Church conceived as a visible body organized for the saving of mankind. Set on fire with zeal for the house of God, as he himself tells us,<sup>7</sup> by the blasphemies of those who sought to lay the overthrow of Rome to the charge of the Christian religion, he undertook this great apologetic treatise in defence of the Church which he sees rising in the form of a new civic order on the crumbling ruins of the Empire. The Church,

<sup>5</sup> *Enarr. in Ps.*, cxxvii, 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ep.* xliii, 7; liii, 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Retract.*, bk II.

indeed, stands as a city upon a hill, distinct and clear in its graceful proportions, a mark thereby for the hostility of the world. But elect and reprobate are intermingled in this world, and God's eye alone infallibly distinguishes them. 'We divide 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 predestined to reign eternally with God, the other to suffer eternal punishment with the devil.'<sup>8</sup> '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.'<sup>9</sup>

Ever since Augustine wrote the fine, pregnant phrases which abound in *The City of God* they have been studied and commented upon by Christian thinkers—who, it must be admitted, did not always grasp their exact meaning: such being frequently the lot of syntheses like this, too vast for immediate application. Much more than a criticism of pagan religions, an apology for Christianity, or even a philosophy of history, *The City of God* is an exposition of the nature of divine operation in the world, in the way that *The Confessions* are an account of God's action in one individual.

So far we have been considering Augustine's work in relation to the circumstances of his life and times. But about the period that he was thinking out the beginning of *The City of God* he was putting the finishing touches to another book, probably more important in his eyes. Although he had often in the past had to do battle against the Arians, and had written, too, some controversial books against them, he wanted to meditate for himself, as it were, and apart from all controversy, upon the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. The treatise *De Trinitate* occupied him for nearly thirty years and during this long period grew up silently in the author's mind. This has given it somewhat more of completeness and organic arrangement than is usual with Augustine. But what makes the *De Trinitate* so interesting is that it is not merely an essay in speculative theology. Men like Augustine can never take up the pen without revealing something of themselves. And so, after explaining the doctrine of the Trinity in a manner that has become classic, the theologian gives place to the

<sup>8</sup> *De Civ. Dei*, xv, I.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* xiv, 28.

mystic speaking to us from his own personal experience. Although he does not speak in the first person, yet when he is talking of that possession of God which is enjoyed by the pure of heart, of the knowledge and vision of God promised to the spiritual man, we feel instinctively that he did not get all this from books; rather is it the fruit of that ever-increasing intimacy with God in which he lived from the day of his conversion. Elsewhere in his writing Augustine insists on the facts of fallen humanity to such an extent that one might be tempted to think of him almost as a soured pessimist. But the real Augustine is quite other. True, he knows man well enough not to be blind to his weakness; but he also knows him well enough to recognize his greatness and to bless God for it. In a word, he has the right to tell us how God is known and loved by the saint.

The magnificent prayer which concludes the *De Trinitate* is a salutary reminder of the imperfections and limitations of human knowledge, not excepting the knowledge of the theologian: '... when we shall have reached You, all our words which, though we multiply them continually, never adequately express our thoughts, will have an end at last; and You alone will remain, All in all, and we will have only one word on our lips for evermore, praising You with one voice, and all of us being henceforth and for ever but one in You.'

Mention of the *Confessions* has been purposely kept to the end of this article for, in a sense, their very popularity has done a disservice to Augustine's other works and also, therefore, to a full knowledge of his mind. There is no one who has not read the *Confessions* or, at any rate, wanted to read them. And it is on this book alone that our idea of St Augustine is often based, whereas it must be remembered that the *Confessions* end when Augustine is but thirty-two years of age. No matter how rich and varied his spiritual experience, his work for the service of God and the Church was still to come. He does not stop being interesting the moment he is converted.

And yet, really, it is only natural that the *Confessions* should be a favourite book: it was so in its author's own lifetime,<sup>10</sup> and it is so today. Some are drawn by its devotion, some by its philosophy, but all are charmed by it. It is great writing: 'a mirror in which we see ourselves and our own experience. For

<sup>10</sup> *De dono perseverantiae*, 20.

however much Augustine owes to the spirit of his own time, that is to say to the spirit of the dying ancient world, he is in the essentials of his mind a modern man.<sup>11</sup> The scenes of his early life stand out like pictures; and his mother lives before our mind's eye as if we had seen her in the flesh. His whole existence, so marvellously directed towards God, establishes decisively the triumph of grace. 'And behold Thou wert within me while I made search for Thee without: unsightly that I was, I rushed headlong upon those beautiful things Thou hast made. Thou indeed wert with me, but I was not with Thee: those things which, unless they were in Thee, should not be at all, kept me far from Thee. Thou didst call and cry unto me; Thou didst even break open my deafness: discovering Thy beams and shining upon me, Thou didst chase away my blindness: Thy fragrance blew upon me, I drew my breath, and now I pant after Thee; I tasted Thee and now do hunger and thirst for Thee. Thou didst touch me, and I burned to enjoy Thy peace.'<sup>12</sup>

From beginning to end the *Confessions* are primarily a song of praise and thanksgiving to the God who did everything to capture a heart which knew no rest till it rested in Him.

<sup>11</sup> Karl Adam, *St Augustine: the Odyssey of his Soul*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Confess.* x, 27.

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## ST AUGUSTINE AS A PREACHER

EDMUND HILL, O.P.

**T**HERE is to my mind little doubt that St Augustine regarded preaching as the most important of a bishop's duties. It is the pastoral work *par excellence*, to feed the flock, to break the bread of the Word to the hungry. It is the bishop's proper mode of almsgiving, of investing the talent which the Lord has given to him. 'To lead a carefree life of leisure', says Augustine, 'little force would be needed to make me do that. There could be nothing more enjoyable than rummaging about in the divine treasure chest, with no one to plague me. While preaching, arguing, rebuking, building God's house, having to manage for every one, who wouldn't shrink from such a heavy burden? But the gospel scares me'<sup>1</sup>—namely, the parable of the

<sup>1</sup> *Sed terret me Evangelium*, S. 339.