

## AN INTERNATIONAL AUGUSTINIAN CONGRESS

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SOME twenty-five years ago, the fifteenth centenary of the death of St Augustine (August 28th, 430) occasioned a considerable output of articles, *mélanges*, and full-length studies. The sixteenth centenary of the birth of the great African doctor (November 13th, 354) occurs this year, and the well-known Augustinian scholar Père F. Cayré, A.A., had the happy idea of organizing a congress to bring together theologians and historians, philosophers and patristic scholars, in order to see exactly how research on Augustine had developed in the past twenty-five years. This congress, which was held in Paris from September 21st-24th, was extremely successful. Some three hundred and fifty congressistes from within France and abroad, priests and laymen, religious and seculars, Catholic and non-Catholic, met in Paris at the *Institut Catholique*. Forty universities were officially represented. Among English-speaking scholars we noticed Professors Armstrong, Baxters, and Burnaby, H. Chadwick, O'Meara (from Dublin), Quasten (from Washington), Dr Cross and Fr Callus, and doubtless many more whose names escape us. One hundred and ten communications were sent which fill two large volumes of 1,160 pages. To avoid the wearisome reading of papers and prevent the congressistes being split up into small groups, the contributions were ranged around certain main themes, were presented by a reporter, and discussed at each session. One was thus able to hear and discuss the reports of Mlle. Mohrman, on philosophical and literary questions, of Professors Mandouze on mysticism, Pincherle on Platonism, Marrou on the theology of history, etc. The discussions, often close, sometimes decidedly animated, were invariably of great interest.<sup>1</sup>

Where so much was of value, the contributions taken as a whole might nevertheless well appear to be a purely random gathering of highly-selected subjects, and that was perhaps

1 The text of the papers and the *compte rendu* of the discussions will be published in a volume which will form Volume III of the *Acts* of the Congress. The three volumes will be published by *les Etudes Augustiniennes*, 8, rue François Ier, Paris, 8<sup>e</sup>.

inevitable. However, certain characteristic features stand out which it will be interesting to set against the publications of 1930: one will thus get some impression of the progress of Augustinian studies over a quarter of a century. Source problems remain to the fore, and people are still asking if, and how far, Augustine was platonist or Christian. The question is probably a false one, and should doubtless be by-passed: alongside the influence of Plotinus we should look for that of Origen; above all, the philosophical texts of Augustine should not be considered in isolation, but should be taken in the context of his work as a whole. It would then become clear that Augustine is biblical rather than platonizing. The question of the mysticism of Augustine is an old problem too: the brilliant report of A. Mendouze was largely a lengthy history of the subject. It possibly involves another false question: one report was called: 'Was St Augustine an intellectualist or a mystic?' Why should he not have been both together? It seems that on the whole matter people so often start with an *a priori* definition of mysticism—or else they let themselves be influenced by dogmatic presuppositions (as in the famous thesis of A. Nygren). Here again people are too easily struck by passages of a plotinian flavour and pass over revealing ones of supposedly less importance such as those in the *Enarrationes* and the *Tractates*. The report of Professor Mandouze was chiefly a lesson in method, but this conclusion became clear: 'mysticism is the starting-point and the meeting point of all the avenues in Augustine's thought'.

By contrast, the theology of history was among the new problems: scarcely anyone spoke of this twenty-five years ago. However, our age which, like that of Augustine, has witnessed so many dramas and calamities could scarcely fail to ask itself, as he did, about the meaning of the destiny of the *Civitas terrena* as much as that of the *Civitas Dei*. H. I. Marrou brought out all the questions that are involved here, not only that of the connection between the two cities, but also, and above all, the philosophical and theological problem of time. The discussion made clear the eschatological significance of the idea of the City of God, as opposed to the platonist conception of cyclic time, '*le mythe de l'éternel retour*'. The great classical questions of grace and original sin were the subject of an important paper by the late Père

Demian, O.P. (Fribourg),<sup>2</sup> and of a close discussion between Père Ch. Boyer, S.J. (Rome), and Père Rondet, S.J. But as Prof. Philips (Louvain) remarked, the interest of theologians and patristic scholars seemed to converge chiefly on the christocentric aspect of Augustine's thought, on the place he gives to Christ in the mystery of salvation, on the Church, on Scripture, on the sacraments. It was pointed out in this connection (by Père Audet, O.P., Montreal) that the importance of the sign in Augustine's theology of the sacraments should be studied. The usefulness of studying the liturgical and pastoral significance of the work of Augustine was also emphasized. The persistence of Augustinian currents in the theology of St Thomas Aquinas equally deserves systematic study, and among the pertinent contributions dealing with Augustine's influence on the Middle Ages it is to be regretted that no one touched on this subject of really primary importance.

One can at any rate see that this Congress provided an interim report on Augustinian studies as a whole, as well as a point of departure and a programme for further work. Many of the suggestions put forward during the course of it will be remembered, not least that of Père Cayré proposing a fresh meeting in ten years' time. Above all, the occasion demonstrated the interest of Augustine for Christian thought and even for Western thought in general. The collection of communications is called *Augustinus Magister*: its title expresses the truth. The thought of Augustine is complex. He is heir to the entire tradition of the ancient world as well as to the full Christian tradition. He is the master of the entire Latin Middle Ages, and even of many contemporary currents of thought. His influence has been equally complex and has been felt in many differing directions, sometimes even opposed to each other. Yet in this diversity there is a profound unity, and to this the Congress was a living witness. Composed of so large a number of quite different men, who approached it from standpoints often spiritually and intellectually distant, it did not set them against each other, but drew them together in a common loyalty to the great doctor of charity.

<sup>2</sup> Père Demian, who was unwell, was unable to be present at the Congress; he was to die unexpectedly soon after it was over.