

ST. AUGUSTINE ON PEACE AND WAR¹

'If good people feel disgust at a nation which—simply with a view to extending its dominion—spontaneously provokes a war with neighbouring States which are at peace with it and have done them no harm—then I can only say that I applaud their praiseworthy feelings.'—*De Civitate Dei*, IV, xiv.

¹ Remarkably little seems to have been written on this subject. Yet Augustine is quite justly described as 'the Father of the Philosophy of History,' and even if he had not treated of the subject almost 'ex professo'—as we hope to show—no remarks of his on the part war has played in the history of the world could fail to be of interest. So far the only discussion on his attitude to the problems are a Paper by Fr. Vincent Scully, C.R.L., in the *Clergy Review* for Feb., 1932, and also Ypres de la Brière, *La Conception de la Paix et de la Guerre chez S. Augustin*, *Revue de la Philosophie*, 1916. See too R. Regout, S.J., *La doctrine de la guerre juste de S. Augustin à nos jours d'après les théologiens et les canonistes catholiques*, 1935, though the author is more concerned with Franciscus de Victoria who has, he thinks, broken with scholastic teaching on the requisites for a just war.

The above passage—so peculiarly apropos to the events of to-day—shows us what the Bishop of Hippo's reactions to the present crisis would have been. Yet to gentle, peace-loving Augustine, ever absorbed in the needs spiritual as well as temporal of his flock, war was—as indeed it must be to every thinking man—something unspeakably horrible. In the earlier Books of his *De Civitate Dei*, fittingly described as a manual of the Philosophy of History, his treatment of the problems raised by the very notion of war is perhaps more theoretical than practical. For he is there concerned with the wars of past history, those on which the Roman Empire had been built up. His atti-

tude towards that Empire with its well-nigh world-dominion is not easy to gauge. Though full of admiration for its power and extent as well as for its peculiarly effective administration, he cannot but regard that huge empire with its ever-extending conquests as something of a portent. For its very size made it only comparable to a flood: 'the greater the volume of water, the greater the danger.'²

The earlier wars waged by the Romans were, if that Empire had to be created at all, necessary. But Augustine, while conceding this, felt that the very extent of the resulting Empire was in itself a source of danger. For that ever-growing extension 'led to even worse kinds of war, such as the social and the civil wars, wars which brought grievous distress to the entire human race; for while war was on they were always craving for peace, and when at length peace did come there was always the haunting fear lest war should break out again.'³

Yet despite all the dread which the portent of that wide-flung empire evoked in his mind, Augustine felt that he had to be fair to it. For there was another side to the question, and Augustine presents it in curiously tentative fashion, even leaving us in doubt as to what his own view really was:

'It may well be asked, however, whether good people ought not to be glad to see the kingdom to which they belong grow in extent. For the wickedness of peoples against whom just wars are waged does result in the extension of that kingdom. But that kingdom would, however, remain but small in size so long as the tranquil state and rectitude of neighbouring nations did not—owing to the fact that they have done no wrong—allow of a just war being undertaken against them. If ever men were in such a happy condition as that, all the smaller nations would

² *De Civitate Dei*, XIX, vii.

³ *Ibid.*

rejoice at being able to live at peace with their neighbours, and there would then be many kingdoms in the world, just as there are many families of citizens in a city. It follows then that to undertake a war with a view to extending your kingdom by the conquest of other nations seems a desirable thing to wicked people only; while to good people it may be question of a necessary duty. In fact, since it would be a far worse thing that the wicked should lord it over good people, even the necessary duty devolving on these latter may well be accounted something desirable. Yet unquestionably it is a far happier thing to have your neighbours living at peace with you than to have to go to war in order to subjugate an unruly neighbour. To want to have for your neighbour some one whom you hate or fear, so that you may have an excuse for attacking him, betrays an evil frame of mind.

'Since, then, the Romans owed the immense extension of their empire to the fact that they waged not unjust but just wars, were they justified in worshipping this very wickedness of others as a sort of deity? For it cannot be denied that this very wickedness, productive as it was of dangerous peoples against whom a just war could be waged—with consequent extension of the victors' empire—co-operated very largely in producing this extension of the empire.'⁴

But what appalled the Bishop far more than the unceasing encroachments of the Empire was the moral corruption of the Romans themselves. This was never exhibited in a worse light than in the orgies of pleasure-seeking which were so deplorable a feature of those dark days of August, 410, when the proud city fell: 'while Eastern peoples and mighty cities in far-distant lands publicly bemoaned your fall you yourselves flocked to the theatres and filled them with your crowds!'⁵

⁴ *De Civitate Dei*, IV, xv.

⁵ *De Civitate Dei*, I, xxxiii.

And Augustine himself bemoaned the fall of the illustrious city. He felt with St. Irenaeus that 'the world has peace through the Romans, and we walk along the roads and sail the seas without fear whithersoever we will.'⁶ Again and again in his sermons and correspondence the Bishop returned to the subject of a disaster which had, he was convinced, done real harm to the entire world. Indeed, so much did he insist on the terrible nature of this calamity that people used to say when discussing his sermons at that time: 'Oh! If only he would stop talking about Rome!' ⁷ But though dismayed at the disaster, Augustine—always an optimist—refused to give up hope: 'After all, the Roman Empire, though sorely afflicted, is not changed. She recovered when similar things happened to her before the Christian era; no need, then, to despair of yet another such recovery in these present times. Who knows what may be the will of God in this regard?' ⁸

But the ever-increasing inroads of the northern hordes, followed by the sack of Rome, August 4th, 410, with the consequent flood of refugees into Africa, compelled the peoples of that country to realise that the barbarian invasion might one day affect themselves as well as the continent of Europe. This dread is reflected in *Ep.* cxi written to a priest named Victorianus c. A.D. 409,⁹ also in the latter portion of the *De Civitate Dei*, especially in Bk. XIX, where the Bishop of Hippo faces the problems more directly.

No small proportion, too, of his Letters is addressed to various Roman officials, all of course military men; with many of these he was on intimate terms, and they appealed to him for advice on various subjects, several times on prob-

⁶ *Adv. Haer.*, IV, xxx, 2.

⁷ *Sermon*, cv, 12; cf. *Sermon*, ccxvi, 6; *Ep.* xcix, to *Italica*.

⁸ *De Civitate Dei*, IV, vii.

⁹ See below.

lems arising out of war. Like every student of history he had his heroes and was ready to recognise heroism wherever he found it. One of these was the famous Roman General, Regulus, whose patience under unmerited sufferings at the hands of both Romans and Carthaginians alike, and whose refusal to commit suicide when it would have provided him with an easy way of escape from the oath he had taken, and which no persuasion could induce him to break, provoke his admiration; of the atrocious sufferings inflicted on him by the Carthaginians he can only say that 'they would have made even the heathen gods blush had they had any blood wherewith to blush.'¹⁰ Regulus was a heathen and a soldier, yet Augustine is not afraid to say of him and of others like him: 'mighty warriors such as these are in truth great men and deserve their due meed of praise.'¹¹

Another of Augustine's heroes was the Imperial Commissary, Marcellinus, this time a Christian soldier. Attached to the Bishop of Hippo by ties of the most intimate friendship, in constant correspondence with him on all sorts of theological questions,¹² he was a veritable Bayard, and Augustine never wearies of singing of his patience and of his singularly chaste life.¹³ Murdered at the instigation of the Donatists, against whom he had had to give an adverse decision in the famous Conference held at Carthage in 411, his name stands in the Martyrology for

¹⁰ *De Civitate Dei*, I, xv, xxiv, III, xviii, i, V, xviii, 2; *Ep.* cxxv, 3.

¹¹ *Ep.* cxxix, 2, to another soldier, Count Darius.

¹² Augustine had sent him his *De Baptismo Parvulorum*, *Ep.* cxxxix, 3, had answered his questions on the Old Law, *Epp.* cxxxvi and cxxxviii, also on his *De Libero Arbitrio*; he had also sent him his treatise *De Gestis Pelagii*, and had dedicated to him the *De Civitate Dei*, cf. the *Praefatio*.

¹³ See *Epp.* cxxviii-ix, cxxxiii-iv, cxxxix, and especially cli.

April 6th; he was, as Francis Baldwin styled him, 'magnum jurisprudentiæ decus.'¹⁴

Another soldier who might have been a hero had he listened to the Bishop was Boniface, Tribune and Count. Much attracted to Augustine, who preached before him at Carthage, 'ad mensam Cypriani,'¹⁵ he had written asking him to explain in what precisely the errors of the Arians and the Donatists consisted. Augustine replied in an immensely long letter—he calls it 'prolixum librum'—in which he answers his questions after taking occasion to congratulate him on the fact that 'even in the midst of the anxieties arising from war and the preoccupations of a soldier's life you are yet interested in the things of God.'¹⁶ The next year Boniface lets the Bishop know through an intermediary that he is anxious about his eternal salvation which, apparently, he fears he may not attain owing to his being a soldier. To this Augustine replies¹⁷: 'Do not imagine that no one who is engaged in military service can be pleasing to God'; and he quotes the cases of David and of Cornelius the Centurion, who was not only himself a soldier, but sent a soldier to St. Peter to ask him to come. He then gives Boniface some very practical advice: 'When arming for battle, first of all remember that your prowess—even your bodily vigour—is the gift of God. Further, when you have once pledged your word you must keep to it, even with the enemy you are fighting against, and, *a fortiori*, with the friend for whom you are fighting. While necessity compels you to fight, your will must be fixed on peace as the goal aimed at, so that God may deliver you from the sad necessity and preserve you in peace. For no one aims at peace with a view to preparing for war; but

¹⁴ *Patrol. Lat.*, XI, 1441.

¹⁵ *Sermon*, cxiv.

¹⁶ *Ep.* clxxxv, A.D. 417.

¹⁷ *Ep.* clxxxix, c. A.D. 418.

we wage war to secure peace. In fighting, then, be peaceful-minded, in the hope that by conquering those whom you are fighting you may bring to them, too, that real gain which is peace. Rebellion and resistance have to be met with violence; but mercy has to be exhibited to the vanquished and to prisoners, more especially when there is no reason to fear lest they should once again prove disturbers of the peace.' Augustine adds some pithy advice on the need of chastity in his military service, though he congratulates Boniface on his good reputation, telling him that he wants him to regard this letter 'as a mirror in which you may see yourself as you actually are, not merely as you ought to be.'

But alas! Boniface failed Augustine. Whether rumours had already reached the Bishop when he counselled chastity in his previous letter we cannot be certain. However that may be, on the death of his wife, Boniface had had a long interview with Augustine and Alypius together at Tubunum and had declared his intention of becoming a monk, an intention which the two Bishops countered by pointing out 'how much he would be helping the Church if he devoted himself to defending it from the barbarian invaders and so enabling her to live in peace and quiet.' They added that since he craved for a monastic life, he could, even in the army, lead a chaste life, contented with the little that would be necessary for himself and those dependent on him, 'all the stronger in the purely material sphere because buoyed up by the spiritual.' But despite his quondam desire to become a monk, the Count took another wife; and though he insisted on her becoming a Catholic—she had been an Arian—he allowed their infant daughter to be baptized by the Arians, and he himself even ceased to be faithful to his wife. Ambition and worldly prosperity were proving his ruin.¹⁸ Though supreme in Africa owing to the civil war raging in Italy, where he had

¹⁸ *Ep.* ccxx, at the close of A.D. 427.

supported Valentinian and Placidia against the usurper John, Boniface had done nothing to check the Vandals whom he had previously defeated in Spain, and at last actually called them to his aid in Africa, 'barbari contra barbaros'; hence the Vandal invasion which destroyed at one blow the glorious African Church which Augustine had so laboriously rebuilt out of the devastation wrought by the Donatists.¹⁹

Only twice does St. Augustine refer to the Roman Dictators; but both references are significant: Hortensius was, he says, 'created Dictator owing to long-continued and grievous sedition at Rome, a thing only done in a grave crisis. Yet even when peace was restored, Hortensius retained that office till his death, a thing which had never before happened in the case of any Dictator and which was a grievous offence to the gods.'²⁰ The well-known case of Cincinnatus, of course, appealed to Augustine: 'he was made Dictator, an office even more honourable than that of Consul, but when he had won immense renown through his defeat of the enemy, he returned to his former state of poverty.'²¹

St. Augustine was, then, in touch with the military world. He knew well the problems that any God-fearing soldier had to face; he knew, too, something of what the threatened barbarian invasion would mean, though he was spared the actual spectacle of the horrors committed by the Vandal hordes²²: 'Mortuus est Augustinus civitate Hipponensi obsessa.'²³

¹⁹ See Pallu de Lessert, *Vicaires d'Afriques*, ii 281 ff., also *Fastes des Provinces Africaines*, ii, 281.

²⁰ *De Civitate Dei*, III, xvii, 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, V, xviii, 1.

²² Victor of Vita gives terrible account of them in his *De Persecutione Vandalica*.

²³ Possidius, *Vita Augustini*, cap. xxviii.

The above passages show, then, that Augustine's views on war and its problems are not merely the speculative imaginings of some armchair critic, but the considered utterances of a man who had to face its problems in his public as well as in his private capacity. Nor should it be forgotten that the Bishop was well aware that every word he wrote would be read with deepest interest by a very large circle of readers, and that not only during his life, but for a very long time after.²⁴

What were the problems that in the minds of many Christian soldiers called for a solution? Some of the early Martyrs in the service of the Empire felt that such service was incompatible with Christianity, since they were liable to be called on to offer sacrifice to the heathen deities. There was little fear of such a demand in Augustine's day; but we have seen how Count Boniface seemed to fancy that military service must somehow be displeasing to God. But the case of Volusianus, uncle of Melania the Younger, seems to have been typical of many. For when he wrote to Marcellinus begging him to induce the Bishop of Hippo to explain how the Gospel precept of turning the other cheek and St. Paul's admonition not 'to render evil for evil' could be reconciled with the duty of fighting for one's country, Marcellinus said, when forwarding the request to Augustine: 'your anxiously awaited reply will certainly reach many.'²⁵ It was really the difficulty of the 'conscientious objector' with whom we are familiar to-day, and it is interesting to see how Augustine deals with it. To begin with, he takes it seriously—as it was meant. For he was well aware that many earnest Christian minds were

²⁴ 'I hope that, if God in His mercy permits it, I may be able by my studies to be of some profit even to posterity,' *Ep.* cli, 13, to Caecilianus, A.D. 413-14, shortly after the murder of Marcellinus; see many similar allusions to the way in which his writings were eagerly read, *Epp.* cii, 1, cxix-cxx, clxix, 13, &c.

²⁵ *Ep.* cxxxvi, 3.

feeling the same difficulty: 'If,' he says, 'Christian teaching really implied that all war was wrong, then surely the advice given to soldiers anxious about their salvation should have been that they would do well to lay down their arms and abjure military service. Whereas as a matter of fact the advice given was: "Do violence to no man, neither calumniate any man, and be content with your pay" (Lk. iii, 14). When he (the Baptist) tells them to be content with their pay he is certainly not condemning military service.'²⁶

This should have been a sufficient answer for one who believed in the Gospel narrative. But Augustine, in typical fashion, is not content with that, but proceeds to retort the argument: 'And I would add: should not people who urge that Christ's teaching does not make for the well-being of the State begin by showing us an army composed of soldiers of such character as Christ's teaching demanded? Ought they not first of all to show us fellow-countrymen of their own: husbands, wives, parents, children, masters, servants, kings, judges, tax-payers—as well as tax-gatherers—all exhibiting the characteristics demanded by Christian teaching? When they can do that, then let them say—if they dare—that such people do not make for the well-being of the State.'²⁷

Long before this, c. A.D. 404, the Bishop had had to defend the legitimacy of war against Faustus the Manichean. That 'windbag,'²⁸ 'ingenio callidus' but ruined by his Manichaeism,²⁹ boasted that he was a model of Evangelical perfection—though he slept on a feather-bed—and frankly called himself a 'pacifist';³⁰ he even thought that

²⁶ *Ep.* cxxxviii, 15.

²⁷ *Ep.* cxxxviii, 15.

²⁸ *Confessions*, V, xiii, 23.

²⁹ *Contra Faustum*, i, 1; cf. Combès, *La doctrine politique de S. Augustin*, 1922, p. 267.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, i, 5-8.

he was doing honour to the Patriarchs by repudiating the Biblical accounts of their polygamy and the warlike propensities they—including Moses—exhibited;³¹ God, he maintained, could never have bidden Moses to slay the Egyptian any more than he could have bidden the Hebrews 'spoil the Egyptians.'³² 'But why,' asks Augustine, 'object to war? Is it because you resent the notion that in order that the victors may reign in peace men have to die, men who anyhow would have to die sooner or later? Only cowards think like that; not God-fearing men! No, what you ought to object to in war is the love of inflicting suffering, revengeful cruelty, an implacable attitude, savagery in the way war is waged, lust of domination. In point of fact, wars are often undertaken by good people precisely in order to inflict due punishment for such doings and out of resentment of unjust aggression; and they wage such a war either at God's bidding or that of legitimate authority; for people sometimes find themselves so situated that the very existence of society compels rulers and subordinates alike, the one to give, the other to execute such orders.'³⁴

'Legitimate authority': Faustus the 'pacifist' would have met with short shrift from Augustine had he come before his tribunal. For, as he pithily remarks: 'There you have the whole question: Why, and on what authority do men go to war? Yet is it not certain that the very order of nature—aiming as it does at peace among us mortal men—demands that the authority for undertaking a war and the determination to do so rests with the head of the State, and that for the military to carry out such orders is a duty they owe to the community if they are to ensure its peace and welfare?'³⁵

³¹ *Ibid.*, i, 1.

³² *Ibid.*, xxii, 1 and 73.

³³ *Ibid.*, xxii, 69.

³⁴ *Contra Faustum*, xxii, 74.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

Since he had repudiated the warlike spirit exhibited by the Patriarchs in the Old Testament on the ground that it was opposed to the spirit of Christ, Faustus was obliged to maintain that New Testament teaching was opposed to war. He had apparently declared that a man serving in the army was a 'deserter,' presumably from Christ's standard.³⁶ Augustine gave him the same answer as we have seen him make to Volusianus, but he puts it even more forcibly: 'On your supposition,' he says, 'the Baptist should have replied: "Lay aside your arms, give up military service, neither strike nor wound nor bring ruin and devastation upon anyone." But since he realised that when engaged in war these soldiers were not murderers but were simply servants of the law, were not out to avenge any personal grievances of their own, but were engaged in defending the State, he replied: "Do violence to no man, neither calumniate any man, and be content with your pay."' Augustine then points out that Christ Himself was well aware when He bade man pay tribute to Caesar that such tribute went to pay the soldiers necessary for carrying on war. Neither did He, when commending the faith of the Centurion, bid him give up military service. 'But,' concludes Augustine, as though realising the futility of arguing such points with Faustus, 'it would take us too long to discuss the question of just and unjust wars, nor is there any call to do so.'³⁷

But though declining to discuss this question with Faustus, Augustine is elsewhere singularly emphatic in his pronouncements on the just—because necessary—character of some wars. True, he never could have envisaged a war waged as it is to-day. But would foreknowledge of the incredible brutalities of to-day have modified his view? Aggression was—we might almost say—the slogan of his

³⁶ *Contra Faustum*, v, 2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, xxii, 74.

day, and on it he remarks—and his words served as a fitting opening to this article:

'If good people feel disgust at a nation which—simply with a view to extending its dominion—spontaneously provokes a war with neighbouring States which are at peace with it and have done it no harm—then I can only say that I applaud their praiseworthy feelings.'³⁸ It is true, he says elsewhere, that 'a wise man only enters on a war when it is a just war. Yet even the wise man, mindful that he is himself a man, will be much more grieved that the duty of waging a just war should fall upon himself. For if not just, then a war should not be undertaken. In this sense, indeed, there would, in the wise man's opinion, be no such thing as a war; for it is only the crimes of the enemy that compel a wise man to undertake to fight. Surely no one who reflects on the awful horrors and cruelties of war can fail to regard war as a misery. A person who puts up with them or even thinks about them without a sense of dismay is a far more miserable object than war itself; all the more that he seems to find his happiness in being dead to all human feelings.'³⁹

Good and peaceful-minded people, then, must at times feel compelled to enter on a war against criminal nations: 'It is the wickedness of the enemy that compels a sensible man to war against them. And such wickedness always causes grief, for it is the wickedness of our fellow men; and this is true even when it does not prove necessary to go to war because of it.'⁴⁰ With peculiar appropriateness in view of present-day repudiation of all justice, the Bishop insists that, unless punished, the wrongdoer simply takes advantage of his impunity and proceeds from outrage to outrage. Whereas once a man's impunity in ill-doing is checked, it

³⁸ *De Civitate Dei*, IV, xiv.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, XIX, vii.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

is he who proves the real gainer by being vanquished. For what more hapless than a sinner's happiness? It only serves to breed impunity; an impunity which is in itself a punishment; like some hidden disease his evil state will but grow worse.⁴¹

HUGH POPE, O.P.

(To be concluded)

⁴¹ *Ep.* cxxxviii, 14.