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Why We Still Need Augustine

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Abstract

St Augustine has been the most influential single voice in the history of western Christianity. Those in quest of a new theology often find it necessary to begin by criticizing him. This is fair enough; but a Christianity conscious of its past cannot discard him. This is clear in ecumenical dialogue with the Churches of the Reformation: their theology is hugely indebted to Augustine, and dialogue between them and Catholics must often return to him as their common source. Augustine lived in an age, like our own, where Christian values were not dominant in society, and where a Christian active in society had to show readiness to compromise in order to maximize the common good. To this we can relate his teaching on sexuality, where he accepted that the Church had to tolerate sexual behaviour within marriage that did not satisfy the strict letter of Christian morality but was often necessary for marital harmony. Here again was an area where the Church had to recognize a secular sphere with its own character and needs. Augustine's teaching on the prime importance of harmony in society went together with a lack of belief in human progress that contrasts sharply with the recent teaching of *Gaudium et spes*; but it is the latter that, fifty years after the Council, begins to look dated. The Church must maintain a constant dialogue with tradition. Within that tradition Augustine's place cannot be contested.

Keywords

Augustine, Gaudium et spes, Calvin, secularity, kingdom of God

Many of us will remember the conference we held some years ago at Leuven, keen to prove our European credentials, and aware that gluttons for punishment could stay on a few days to attend an international conference organized in the Leuven Theology Faculty. I myself stayed on long enough to hear a distinguished American professor of theology – whose name I shall omit, not out of charity but because I have forgotten it – hold forth on the continuing relevance today of

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the work of St Augustine. In one way he was well equipped to treat this theme, since he knew (I presume) about current theology, which I cannot claim. But in another way he was less than well equipped, because, as he confessed, he had no deep knowledge of Augustine. Still, he assured us, he had over the summer been looking into his works. He found, he told us, that, even though you would not nowadays turn to Augustine for illumination on church and society, or sex and marriage, or this and that, or that and this, it would be a mistake to dismiss him as totally irrelevant for the present day, because if you delved deep enough you would find certain nuggets that were well worth bringing out into the light. What these nuggets were, to be rescued out of the dross, was still not clear by the end of the lecture. As we left the hall, I exclaimed to my companion, "I think that is the worst lecture I have ever heard". He nudged me, and looking round I found that, by a happy coincidence that gives me pleasure every time I think of it, the eminent speaker was immediately behind me.

To so condescending a tone, as of a professor commending the work of a student as not quite as bad as one might have expected, I would have preferred outright condemnation – as in the delightful hatchet job performed by Voltaire in his *Philosophical Dictionary*, if I may quote the entry on "Original Sin":[1]

> It is an insult to God, an accusation of the most absurd barbarity, to venture to say that he formed all the generations of mankind in order to torture them with eternal punishment, on the ground that their first ancestor ate a fruit in a garden . . . . Genesis does not even relate that God condemned Adam to death for having swallowed an apple. He certainly says to him, 'The day that you eat of it you will surely die.' But according to this same Book of Genesis Adam lived for 930 years after his criminal lunch . . . . The Jews knew about original sin no more than about the ceremonies of the Chinese; and although theologians claim to find in Scripture whatever takes their fancy, it is clear that no reasonable theologian could find this amazing doctrine therein. The truth is that St Augustine was the first to propound this strange idea, worthy of the warm and romantic imagination of an African who was both debauched and repentant, Manichaean and Christian, merciful and a persecutor, who spent his whole life contradicting himself.

A more modern writer, Thomas Allin, in his *The Augustinian Revolution in Theology*, published in 1911, puts the case against Augustine still more succinctly: "This great man's influence extended for evil, as his writings show, over practically the whole field of

[1] Voltaire, *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (Paris: Flammarion, 1964), pp. 310–1. This article was first published in 1767. The translations in this essay are all my own, though with debts to earlier versions.

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human activity, social and political, no less than religious."[2] This hits the nail on the head. Such has been the influence of Augustine down the ages – surely no Christian thinker in the western tradition can compete with him in this respect – that, if there is something in Christian tradition that you cannot stand, there is a very good chance that it goes back to Augustine. To dethrone Augustine will then appear the necessary first step before, shedding the load from our backs like Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, we can finally march onwards into the promised land.

Gillian Clark, a distinguished ancient historian, who has addressed numerous audiences on the subject of Augustine, once told me that she finds herself treated by unsympathetic listeners as if she herself were responsible for Augustine's views on women and sex. How is one to defend Augustine? It is often possible to claim that if, for example, you think Augustine quite awful on sex, you ought to read St Jerome: by the standards of his time Augustine's views were actually quite moderate. But this is a feeble defence: all it suggests is that not only Augustine but all the Fathers should be cast onto the rubbish heap.

The Influence of Augustine

My own defence of Augustine as still relevant in the new millennium is limited by my lack of acquaintance with current theological debate: I won't be able to poke my finger into little holes and say that something in Augustine is just right to plug the gap. But there are a number of respects in which I do feel able to recommend him to your sympathetic attention.

The first follows from a fact I have already referred to – the unique breadth of his influence. When my college asked me to teach a module on Augustine as the first course in a degree otherwise devoted to modern theology, I felt that to stop with Augustine's death in 430, with the next module picking up the story in 1930, or even 1960, would make my module an irrelevance – as if a course on modern English history were to start off with a lecture on Boadicea, before leaping on to the post-war Labour government. I therefore decided to conclude my module with a few weeks on Augustine's influence from the age of Thomas Aquinas down to that of Voltaire. What I found is that you can't profitably talk about Luther, or Calvin, or the Council of Trent, without bringing in Augustine, since they all used him, to the extent that referring to him helps enormously

[2] Thomas Allin, *The Augustinian Revolution in Theology* (London: J. Clarke, 1911), p. 25.

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in expounding and explaining what they had in common and where each one was moving into new terrain.

Take the doctrine of justification. Augustine's insistence that election has nothing to do with either actual or foreseen merits and that even after justification we remain lifelong moral invalids, was taken over by Luther. At the same time Trent used Augustine against Luther, citing in its *Decree on Justification* a passage from Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, 'God does not command impossibilities; but in his command he counsels you both to do what you can for yourself, and to ask his aid in what you cannot do.'[3] For Augustine the elect will deserve salvation because of their merits, and yet their merits are God's gift. Strict Lutherans insist that their own position is distinct, and irreconcilable with Catholicism, because they deny that salvation is ever deserved. The truth of this claim to distinctiveness becomes particularly clear if you compare Luther to Augustine.

The debt of John Calvin to Augustine is also obvious, and it has been pointed out that, while he was happy to correct Augustine on matters of biblical interpretation, he never says that he is departing from Augustinian doctrine, even when he is in fact doing so.[4] How seriously do modern Reformed Christians take Calvinism? I took part four years ago in an ecumenical meeting to celebrate the quincentenary of Calvin's birth. A URC minister of some distinction, having represented his church at the World Council of Churches, described the Roman Church as slow on the uptake, but having since Vatican II eventually caught up with some of Calvin's initiatives, of which he singled out three – vernacular liturgy, mothers' attending their children's baptism, and a third point of equal triviality. It was left to me to celebrate Calvin's presentation of the authentic doctrine, going back to Augustine, of predestination. This is not, of course, one of the doctrines of Augustine that the generality of his admirers have any wish to emphasize, and indeed I myself used to pillory it for years. But the sheer obviousness of the anti-predestinarian case became tedious, and to stir apathetic students into convulsions I began to argue in favour of the abominated doctrine. Whether I ever won over any of my students I rather doubt, but I did succeed in convincing myself. Arminianism, with its teaching that it is up to us whether we respond to grace or not, is customarily given too easy a ride. For it implies either that God loves no one individually and unconditionally, but has set up an obstacle race and is there at the finishing post to hand out the prizes, indifferent as to who are the winners, or that God's love for individuals can easily be frustrated,

[3] *Decretum de iustificatione*, cap. 11, DS 1536, citing Augustine, *De natura et gratia* 43.50.

[4] A.N.S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), pp. 38–9.

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like that of many a modern mother, left ineffectually wringing her hands as her little darlings descend into drugs and debauchery. I remember a former dean of St Paul's remarking, "I think of God as rather like an old soldier, full of good will, but rather limited in what he can achieve". Against that we need to set the Dominican tradition, running from Thomas Aquinas to Garrigou-Lagrange, which insisted that God can, and does, elect and save anyone he chooses to. To bring this tradition into contact with Calvin we have to go back to Augustine as their common source. A key question for the believer is whether he can have not indeed certainty, but confidence, that God, if need be, will protect him from himself – whether, that is, one of God's graces is the gift of assurance. This Augustine denied and Calvin upheld; here again a clear perception of the issues sends us back, not uncritically, to Augustine. An ecumenical theology that does justice to both Catholic and non-Catholic traditions of thought cannot pass him by.

This applies, of course, just as much to our Anglican, Lutheran and Reformed brethren as to us Catholics. If we can impress upon them that theology did not begin with St Paul and then sleep till the Reformation, but that the great Reformers were steeped in Augustine, we shall then find in Augustine a common field for exploration, about questions where we need to seek answers through dialogue, as both a preparation and an anticipation of a Christendom reunited at least in spirit.

Augustine and Secularity

To quote the good Thomas Allin again, "Augustine's influence extended for evil, as his writings show, over practically the whole field of human activity, social and political, no less than religious". This does not make selection easy, but the mention of the social and political does point us in the direction of Augustine's views of the relation between the Church and society – a question that was surely the most important one for the Church of Augustine's own time, in the context of new Christian empire, even if it was answered piecemeal in response to immediate needs and with the minimum of theorizing; and it is a question that looms just as large today. In his great work *The City of God*, Augustine sees the distinction between the Church and the secular world of the Roman Empire as mirroring the distinction between two cities, the earthly and the heavenly, that have coexisted since Cain and Abel. His basic definition of these two cities is terribly neat:[5]

[5] *De civitate Dei* XIV. 28. 1–6, CCSL 48, p. 451.

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> The two cities were created by two loves, the earthly one by a love of self carried as far as contempt for God, and the heavenly one by a love of God carried as far as contempt of self. In fact, the former glories in itself, while the latter glories in the Lord. The former looks for glory from men, while the latter finds its greatest glory in God, the witness of a good conscience.

But once Augustine begins to recognize the earthly city in the Roman Empire and the city of God on pilgrimage on earth in the Church, a simple contrast between virtue and vice, between election and reprobation, becomes crude and unhelpful, because it fails to distinguish the two cities as two visible societies, two distinct cultures – the social and historical reality that is the real theme of the work. For as Augustine points out, "the city of Christ the King must indeed remember that among her very enemies are hidden future citizens . . . , just as the city of God, as long as she is a pilgrim on earth, has with her those joined to her in sacramental communion who will not be with her in the eternal destiny of the saints".[6] The two cities are intermingled in such a way that those predestined to eternal felicity cannot in this age be distinguished by human eyes from those who are not. But it is the perceptible reality that we have to deal with – the two contrasting cultures of the Christian faith and civil society, a society that not long before had unjustly persecuted the Church, while justly perceiving it as alien. A Christian is at one and the same time a member of the Church and a member of civil society. How is he to combine these two very different identities?

As a member of society, with responsibilities to his family and his city, and indeed to whatever social sphere he is active in, he shares common interests, and a need to collaborate, with the other members of society, whatever their religious allegiance and whatever their standing in the eyes of God. All alike must seek that harmony of social relations, that stability of living conditions, without which life would descend into chaos. To this desirable state of affairs Augustine gives the simple name of "peace", which he describes as follows:[7]

> Peace between men is an ordered concord; the peace of a household is the ordered agreement about commanding and obeying among those living together. The peace of a city is the ordered agreement about commanding and obeying among fellow citizens . . . . The peace of the whole universe is the tranquillity of order, and order is the arrangement of things equal and unequal in such a way that to each is assigned its proper place.

These shared interests and shared values enable cooperation of a kind that does not require agreement over religious belief or the

[6] Ibid. I. 35. 1–8, CCSL 47, p. 33.
[7] Ibid. XIX. 13. 4–12, CCSL 48, p. 679.

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ultimate good, as an important passage makes plain which deserves to be quoted at length:[8]

> The household of human beings who do not live from faith seeks an earthly peace from the facts and conveniences of this temporal life. But the household of human beings who live from faith looks forward to the everlasting blessings that are promised in the future, makes use of earthly and temporal things as a stranger and sojourner, and does not let itself be held captive by them or distracted from its course towards God, but treats them as supports that help it to bear more easily (and least of all to increase) the burdens of 'the corruptible body which weighs heavy on the soul' [Wisd 9:15]. Thus both kinds of men and both kinds of household make common use of the things necessary for this mortal life, but each has its own very different end in so doing. The earthly city which does not live from faith is in quest of an earthly peace and determines the agreement about commanding and obeying among its citizens in the same way, namely that there should be a certain compact between human wills concerning the things that pertain to this mortal life. But the heavenly city – or rather that part of it which is a stranger and sojourner in this mortal state and lives from faith – has of necessity to make use of this peace also, until this mortal condition, for which this kind of peace is essential, passes away; and therefore it leads in this earthly city the life of a sojourner in captivity. Even though it has already received the promise of redemption and the gift of the Spirit as a pledge, it does not hesitate to conform to the laws of the earthly city by which are administered the things ordained for the support of this mortal life, the purpose being that, since this mortal condition is common to both cities, harmony may be preserved between them regarding what pertains to this condition.

A modern reader may demur at the statement that the good Christian will 'not hesitate to conform to the laws of the earthly city' – ignoring the fact that this is what we all do, and turning his mind to those horrendous regimes (the exception not the rule) that require active participation in horrible crimes. It must be admitted that Augustine did not speak up for conscientious objection, except in the situation where true religion is being persecuted. He held that it is not necessary for the servant of the state to convince himself that each recourse to force is necessary: since the maintenance of state authority is necessary for the common good, he is right to obey orders as they stand, and leave it to his superiors to answer for them before God.[9] Augustine did not speak of a duty to work for the replacement of current social norms with ones based on the gospel, for he knew that it all depended on the wills of individuals, and only God can change those. The notion of an alliance between Christians and all

[8] Ibid. XIX. 17. 1–25, CCSL 48, pp. 683–4.

[9] See John M. Rist, *Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 231–6.

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men and women of good will did not occur to him, since he thought men and women of good will fairly rare even within the Church. "Oh for the wings of a dove", he quoted, "that I might fly away and be at rest" (Ps 54/55.7). So people say, he continues, and yearn for the life of monastic reclusion of the desert. But even there, he points out, there are bad people.[10]

How much can government achieve? It should certainly provide effective defence, to protect a civilized country from barbarian inroads. Augustine had no time for the tradition of Christian pacifism, which remained sufficiently strong for Augustine's own just war theory to find formal acceptance only in the thirteenth-century. But the preservation of order within the Roman world was no less necessary, even if this required the use of regrettable means, including coercion. A modern reader is shocked by Augustine's reluctant acceptance of judicial torture:[11]

> What of those judgements passed by men on their fellow-men, which inevitably occur in cities, however great the peace they enjoy? What do we think about them? How much, indeed, we deplore and lament them – since those who pronounce judgement cannot see into the consciences of those on whom they pronounce it. They are often compelled to torture innocent witnesses when investigating the truth in a case which is no concern of theirs. What do we say of cases when someone is tortured in his own case and in his innocence pays a most certain penalty for an uncertain crime, not because he is detected as having committed it, but because he is not known not to have committed it? And thus the ignorance of the judge is often a disaster for the innocent.... In view of this darkness in the life of society, will our wise man consent to sit as a judge, or will he lack the courage to do so? Obviously, he will sit; for the claims of human society constrain him and draw him to this duty, and he holds that shirking it would be simply wrong.

We have to remember that the lack of the modern resources of police investigation meant that courts required confession by the criminal, and torture was thought necessary to make prompt confession in his self-interest. But the point made here that was novel by early Christian standards was Augustine's insistence that, however distasteful the work of a late Roman judge, a good Christian should be ready to take on the office, and should not leave the dirty work to pagan colleagues. Contrast Leo the Great, who forbade those who had already performed penance, and had thereafter to avoid the occasions of sin, from any involvement in government service, since, as he put

[10] Augustine, *Enarrationes in psalmos* 54.8, CCSL 39, pp. 661–2.
[11] *De civitate dei* XIX. 6. 1–24, CCSL 48, p. 70.

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it, "a man who chooses to involve himself in earthly service is not free from the snares of the devil".[12]

The modern Catholic Church does not idealize political society, but it does idealize the faithful who follow Catholic values in their homes. But here too Augustine saw an inevitable role for coercion:[13]

> Until that home [in heaven] is reached, however, fathers have a duty to exercise their authority as masters, and one that is even greater than the duty slaves have to put up with their servitude. Therefore, if anyone in the household is through his disobedience an enemy of domestic peace, he is reproved by a word, or flogging, or any other kind of punishment that is just and legitimate, to the extent allowed by human society; this is for the benefit of the offender, in order to restore him to the domestic peace from which he had broken away . . . . It is not a mark of blamelessness to be forgiving in a way that makes a serious evil yet more grave. Hence the duty of one who would be blameless includes not only doing no harm to anyone, but also restraining a man from sin or even punishing his sin, so that the man who is punished may be reformed by his experience, or at least others may be deterred by his example.

The significance of such passages is that they express a realization that, human beings acting as they do, society requires the application of norms that the Christian Church can neither approve (for that would betray Christian values) nor condemn (for that would be unrealistic). Christians have a duty to serve society, and have in so doing to keep to its rules. We cannot subsume the secular world within, or under, the Church. We have to respect its fundamental otherness.

A similar point can be made in relation to sexual ethics. The early Christian Church needed a simple rule to determine when sex is, and when it is not, a sin, and they adopted what has been called the Stoic rule, because it first appears in Roman Stoic writers. It was that sex should always be for the purpose of procreation. The way in which early Christian writers, including Augustine, combined this rule with at the same time downplaying the need for procreation, by arguing that the world was already fully populated and the end near, is one of the curiosities of early Christian thought.[14] For Augustine as a pastoral bishop a key question was whether this rule excluded sexual relations within marriage where the purpose was not procreation. In

[12] Leo the Great, *ep*. 67, *inquisitio* 12, PL 54. 1206C-1207A.

[13] *De civitate dei* XIX. 16. 13–25, CSEL 48, p. 683.

[14] See John T. Noonan, *Contraception* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), pp. 81–5, and Augustine, *De bono coniugali* 9–10, ed. PG Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 22.

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his treatise *On the good of marriage* he set out his answer in the following terms:[15]

> When the performance of the marriage debt is insisted upon without moderation, which the Apostle does not prescribe for them as a command but permits as pardonable, in such a way that they have intercourse even when it is not for the purpose of procreation, even though it is perverse habit that impels them to such intercourse, marriage still saves them from adultery or fornication. It is not that such conduct is *approved* because of marriage, but it is *forgiven* because of marriage. Married people, therefore, not only owe each other fidelity in sexual intercourse for the sake of having children . . . , but also in a certain way they owe each other a mutual service to shoulder each other's weakness, and thereby avoid illicit sexual relations. As a result even if one of them would prefer permanent abstinence, this is not possible without the consent of the other. This is why 'the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does, and likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does' [1 Cor 7:4], so that they will not deny each other what the husband seeks from marriage or the wife seeks from the husband, even when it is not for the sake of having children but because of weakness and lack of self-control.

Again modern sensibilities are offended: is sexual desire, even within marriage, at the very best a venial sin? But for Augustine, with his belief that because of their mortal sins most of the human race are on a path to the everlasting bonfire, venial sin is not something to get upset about. The emphasis is not on sin but on toleration. Yet again Augustine's concern is to do justice to the alterity of the conditions of this present life. He is not ready to tell married couples that they have no choice but to struggle to obey the Church's teaching on purity and self-discipline; nor, however, is he ready to pretend that the sexual practices of the human race are an exemplification of Christian values. The Church must condemn adultery and fornication, but it should not aim at colonizing human sexuality, at incorporating it within the sphere of the gospel. The secular world must not be denied its secularity.

I have, with a perversity of spirit that I must confess is innate, taken you through areas of Augustinian thought that are particularly rebarbative to modern sensibilities – from predestination to punishment, and from punishment to a treatment of sexuality that has more to say about lust than about love. None of this would have been included in one of those little anthologies of pretty passages that used to appear with titles like *Les plus belles pages de Saint Augustin* – that would inevitably include the opening of the *Confessions* ('Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in

[15] Augustine, ibid. 6.6, ed. Walsh, pp. 12–14.

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Thee') and Monica's last words: "Lay my body wherever it may be; let no care of it disturb you. This only I ask of you: that you should remember me at the altar of the Lord wherever you may be."[16] Those of us who seek in religious literature a message of uplift and cheer will find much of Augustine like a cold shower. But his sober realism is a lesson in taking in the world as it actually is, and accepting ourselves as we actually are. He was a pluralist who recognized that the complexities of ourselves and the world exclude a single code of conduct, and yet not a relativist who denied an absolute code of values. We can surely learn from him what in this age we *need* to learn from him – to maintain our Christian values without claiming that they solve the problems of the world.

Earthly Progress and the Coming of the Kingdom

But I would like to return to the passage I quoted from Book XIX of the *City of God*, where Augustine says that true citizens of the heavenly city value peace on earth no less than the earthly city does, but for a different motive – not as part of the highest good, but simply a practical need during the brief spell of our earthly pilgrimage. He did not think of Christians setting themselves to create a better and more just society, with improved living conditions and a greater recognition of human rights. This was not just because this would not have been a practical programme at the time of the imminent collapse of the western Roman Empire, but also because he believed vividly in the gospel promise of the *eschaton* – of the return of Christ in glory, the general resurrection, and the crowning of all the elect – and did not believe that anything we can do on earth can hasten or assist the coming of the end.

And here a comparison with the recent teaching of Vatican II in *Gaudium et spes* is surely apposite and will relate to the question whether Augustine is still relevant today. The message of *Gaudium et spes* is that Christians should not concentrate on personal salvation but on contributing to the common good, defined as "the sum of those conditions of social life that enable social groups and their individual members to achieve their own fulfilment more completely and more readily".[17] And work for the common good is not merely the responsibility of governments and institutions:[18]

[16] Augustine, *Confessiones* I.i.1 and IX.xi.27, CSEL 33, pp. 1 and 218–9.

[17] *Gaudium et spes* 26, in Norman Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), II, 1084.

[18] Ibid. 34.

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> This also applies to wholly everyday activities. For men and women who are providing the needs of life both for themselves and for their families are so applying their labour as to serve society in a most appropriate way. They can rightly regard themselves as by their exertions furthering the work of the Creator, as taking thought for the wellbeing of their fellow-men and as making a personal contribution to the implementation of the divine plan in history.

The council fathers issued stern words of rebuke to those who leave the world:[19]

> They depart from the truth who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come [Heb 13:14], think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by the faith itself they are more obliged than ever to fulfil these duties . . . . The Christian who neglects his temporal duties is neglecting his duties towards his neighbour and even towards God himself, and jeopardizes his eternal salvation.

How right the Protestants were to close the monasteries! But does any of this contribute, you may ask, to the aims of religion? The following answer is offered: "Man, created in God's image, has received a mandate to subject to himself the earth and all it contains . . . so that, by the subjection of all things to man, the name of God will be admired in all the earth".[20] In other words, the way to convert the world to God is to improve living conditions.

How is this related to the coming of the kingdom, to the return of Christ in glory? Here the document has rather little to say, but note the following passage:[21]

> Hence, although earthly progress must be carefully distinguished from the growth of Christ's kingdom, because of its ability to contribute to the better ordering of human society, it is of great concern to the kingdom of God. For the values of human dignity, of fellowship and of freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and industry . . . will be cleansed from all disfigurement, embellished and transformed.

Earthly progress will turn us into saints, fit citizens of the New Jerusalem.

According to the treatment of this document in Vorgrimler's commentary on the council documents, the theological horizons in the

[19] Ibid. 43.
[20] Ibid. 34.
[21] Ibid. 39.

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debate were set by a speech by Cardinal Meyer, which contained the following words:[22]

> The Son has a cosmic mission because, as St Paul says, it has pleased the Father to reconcile all things in his Son. This work is only completed at the end of time by the resurrection of the body and the mysterious transformation of the world. There will be, Scripture tells us, a new heaven and a new earth. This transformation actually begins with men's work in the world.

After the council the connection between the two was often expressed by a use of the phrase "the kingdom of God", or more often simply "the kingdom", understood as referring not only to the eschatological kingdom in the age to come, but to the transformation of this world in accordance with God's will. The implication of all this is that the improvement of the human lot on earth is a necessary preparation for the return of Christ in glory – or even constitutes the reality of which talk of Christ's "return" is but a figurative expression.

The contrast with Augustine is striking. Who is right? If appeal is made to the New Testament or to the Christian tradition, the answer is obvious: it is not biblical to think of earthly progress as a prelude, and a necessary prelude, to the end. But this does not, in my view, settle the question decisively, since, with reverence be it said, there is teaching in Holy Writ whose purpose, it would appear, in the divine economy is to provoke us into disagreement. The council was right to put an end to the tendency of the clergy in many Catholic countries to look askance at secular progress, as something that would make the Catholic laity less dependent on the Church. But with the hindsight of fifty years, *Gaudium et spes* does look rather dated. The 1960s were a cheerful time, with World War II now safely in the past and a huge and unprecedented improvement in wealth, health and education throughout the world; even the fear of nuclear war receded after the happy conclusion to the Cuba Crisis. But in 2013 the outlook is more sombre. To insist that earthly progress is the road to the kingdom is carrion comfort to those millions caught in a poverty and oppression that show no signs of lifting; and we cannot speak as if Bosnia, Ruanda and Syria are but passing blips and blodges. It may also be questioned whether the document quite falls under Christian theology: the references to specifically Christian themes, such as the redemptive work of Christ, are incidental, and do not carry the burden of the argument.

[22] Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* (London: Burns & Oates, 1967–9), V, p. 41.

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The pros and cons of this debate would take us away from Augustine, and from my own field of competence. But whatever view we take of this particular document, there is clearly a danger of Christian discourse taking up themes from secular culture, baptizing them rather too readily, and losing its own distinctive voice. To avoid this, it has to keep up a constant dialogue with its own tradition. Scripture taken in isolation is often too strange a voice, and too open to manipulation by exegetical finesse. In this dialogue of the Church with its past, the place of Augustine, as the most influential of all Christian theologians, is not open to doubt.

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