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The Theological Principles Underlying Augustine’s “City of God”

Abstract
In his treatise the *City of God* Augustine intended to show that the pagans anti-Christian charges blaming the Christians for the fall of Rome were unsubstantiated and that it was in Christianity that they could find the solution to many of their own moral and religious problems. The Bishop of Hippo wanted also to equip Christians with the appropriate arguments to refute pagan charges and to make them rejoice in the plan for the Salvation of humankind. In his assessment of the true value of philosophical principles it was essential for Augustine not to renounce the authority of Christ. Augustine claims that the human race is divided into two antagonistic communities, cities, in their pursuit of their respective ‘happiness’ (*civitas Dei; civitas terrena*). The two loves are mutually antithetical; the love of God, which is a social love and a love of justice, which is the very opposite of self-love, is an espousal of injustice.

Keywords
*City of God*, the two loves, *civitas Dei; civitas terrena*, the apologetic motives, the seven ages of the world history
INTRODUCTION

Augustine, Bishop of Hippo Regius, was an orator by education. By the application of certain methods and techniques of the ancient art of persuasion, he tried to teach his readers and listeners, rather than harm them, bearing in mind the Roman proverb «littera docet, littera nocet». These rhetorical tropes, as well as ancient philosophical ideas can be seen in Augustine’s treatise De civitate Dei. However, the motivation behind the writing of this work lay elsewhere. In this article I am going to demonstrate the theological assumptions behind the treatise on the City of God. First, I intend to show the apologetic motives for the writing of De civitate Dei (§ 1), and the theological method it implements (§ 2), in order finally to demonstrate the theological structure of the work (§ 3).

I. APOLOGETIC MOTIVES FOR THE WRITING OF DE CIVITATE DEI

Augustine did not write the treatise the “City of God” casually. The immediate reason to take up the subject was the sacking of Rome by Alaric I, king of the Visigoths in 410, and the anti-Christian accusations adduced by pagans in consequence of that historical disaster. Augustine intended to show the pagans that their anti-Christian charges blaming the Christians for the fall of Rome were unsubstantiated and that it was in Christianity that they could find the solution to many of their own moral and religious problems.

On the other hand, the Bishop of Hippo wanted to equip Christians with the appropriate arguments to refute the pagan charges and to make them rejoice in the plan for the Salvation of humankind. Augustine also undertook a similar subject in some of his sermons (Sermo

1 Augustinus, Retractationes 2.43,1: NBA 2, 212.214.
81,9; Sermo 105,12; Sermo 296,12; Sermo “De Urbis excido” 6) and letters8 (Epistulae 137; 138)9. Most probably, the general outline of the programme incorporated in De Civitate Dei had already been decided on when Augustine started writing it10.

2. THEOLOGICAL METHOD OF De CIVITATE DEI

Augustine began writing the treatise between August 410 and September 413 AD and finalized it between 426 and 427. Therefore, it took him 13–14 years to complete the treatise11. Structurally, De Civitate Dei can be divided into two parts (I. polemics refuting anti-Christian accusations brought by the pagans: books: 1–10; II. presentation and defence of the Christian doctrine: books 11–22), five sections (I. social insufficiency of paganism: books 1–5; II. spiritual insufficiency of paganism: books 6–10; III. the origins of the two states: books 11–14; IV. the history of two states: books 16–18; the destination of the two states: books 19–22) and 22 books12.

In De civitate Dei Augustine adopted a theological method by which he wanted to demonstrate openly and definitively the originality of Christian doctrine. Christian teachings stem from the authority of the Bible, which Augustine applies to the Church, in accordance with the regula fidei; a Christian had a steadfast faith and trust in the

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4 Augustinus, Sermo 81,9: NBA 30/1, 608.610.
5 Augustinus, Sermo 105,12: NBA 30/2, 296.
6 Augustinus, Sermo 296,12: NBA 33, 338.
7 Augustinus, Sermo 397,6: NBA 34, 704.706.
8 C. Lambot, Lettre inédite de saint Augustin relative au «De Civitate Dei», „Revue Bénédictine” 51 (1939), 109–121.
power of reason\(^{13}\). At the same time, Augustine tried cautiously and carefully to draw on these aspects of earlier ancient teachings which were true and significant from the Christian perspective (praise of the heroes embodying the Roman moral virtues, such as the general Marcus Atilius Regulus, the consul Publius Cornelius Scipio Nasica, commander Marcus Furius Camillus, the general Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus the Elder; praise for the laws of the Imperium Romanum; praise for the works of art and men of letters and scholars: Virgil, Cicero, Varro)\(^{14}\).

Simultaneously, the Bishop of Hippo Regius tried very hard to prove that Christian teachings do not contradict but instead perfect true and significant ancient teachings and have become a new synthesis of ancient freedom in the spirit of Christian love. In Augustine’s opinion we can speak of a triple synthesis: of knowledge, virtue and peace. The synthesis of knowledge consists in the explanation of the beginning of the world and its final purpose; the explanation of creation, the issue of cognition/illumination; the issue of love/blessing and the explanation of the problem of evil. The synthesis of virtues lies in the explanation of the meaning of Christian virtue and its integrity through the divine gift of grace, which constitutes the opposite of Roman virtue entangled in vices by *cupido gloriae*, and the lack of reference to God and eternal values of the latter\(^{15}\). The synthesis of peace explains the notion of perfect peace; its conditioning by the internal change of man by grace, which transfigures him and leads to the final victory and immortality, which is equivalent to the blessed state. Thanks to these syntheses, the Christian doctrine presents the world with a divine vision of the history of mankind, thus solving many problems previously proposed by ancient philosophers but, which either remained unresolved or were


given erroneous explanations. In Augustine’s opinion a new culture was born together with Christianity, with a new wisdom and a new interpretation of life and history\textsuperscript{16}.

Therefore, neither Manichaeism\textsuperscript{17} nor Platonism\textsuperscript{18} is the proper key to the interpretation of Augustine’s City of God. The wording used by the Manicheans to refer to the two cities resembles Augustine’s on the nominal level. However, it is worth remembering that though both Mani and Augustine refer to the same passage in the Bible, their interpretation is different. First of all, the Manicheans believed in metaphysical dualism, which Augustine categorically rejected, e.g. in his doctrine of creation, in the notion of evil, through emphasis on the inherent goodness of all creation and in defence of freedom\textsuperscript{19}.

In De civitate Dei, Augustine’s theory of creation, Christ’s mediation, resurrection of the dead, and the eternal happiness for the redeemed\textsuperscript{20} seem to be anti-Platonic. In his assessment of the true value of philosophical principles it was essential for Augustine not to renounce the authority of Christ\textsuperscript{21}. Following this fundamental principle, Augustine rejected the Neoplatonic practices of pagan worship, the pagan contemplation of lesser gods, the theory of the emanation


\textsuperscript{18} As stated, e.g.: H. Leisegang, Der Ursprung der Lehre Augustine von der Civitas Dei, „Archiv für Kirchengeschichte” 16 (1925), 127–158; F. E. Cranz, «De Civitate Dei» XV, 2 et l’idée augustinienne de la société chrétienne, „Revue des Études Augustiniennes” 3 (1957), 15–27, particularly 16.


\textsuperscript{20} Cf.: A. Trapè, Escatologia e antiplatonismo di san Agostino, „Augustinianum” 18 (1978), 237–244.

\textsuperscript{21} Augustine, Contra Academicos 3,20,43: NBA 3,162.164.
of the world, the theory of the necessity of creation, the eternity of the creation in genus and soul in species, the claim of the eternity of the soul and its metempsychosis, and the theory of the soul-body relationship as a punishment for sin. Augustine adapted the following notions from the Platonic and Neoplatonic doctrine: the idea of philosophy defined as the ‘love of wisdom’, the double object of philosophy: God and the soul and their spirituality, the notion of God as the cause of creation, the light of knowledge, and the order of goodness. The idea of philosophy as the love of wisdom brings it closer to religion, where God is wisdom, and hence, generally speaking, where philosophy becomes the love of God.

The vision of the City of God stems from Augustine’s interpretation of the Bible. In his opinion, the Bible depicts the story of the revelation of God’s salvation of mankind. For this reason in De civitate Dei the polemics between Augustine and the Manicheans or Donatists should only be read in the context of his other works. That is because in De civitate Dei Augustine pictures a complementary spiritual vision of Salvation.

The Bishop of Hippo read the Scriptures from a Christological perspective. According to Augustine, it is Christ who is the principle of enlightenment and the tenet of unification, He announces the beginning and the end of history. In the context of worldly history, Christ is presented in De civitate Dei as the point of reference for all good and as the source of the value of this world’s things (an argument against the pagans who claimed the opposite, De civitate Dei I–V). Christ is also depicted as the intermediary and the means of universal salvation (contrary to pagan theology and pagan references to theurgy, De civitate Dei VI–X). Christ is also the founder of the City of God (De civitate Dei XI–XIV), and Christ is the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecies (De civitate Dei XV–XVIII). Finally, Christ is the resurrection, the

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judge and the source of happiness for the redeemed/blessed (*De civitate Dei* XIX–XXII)²⁶.

### 3. Theological Structure of *De civitate Dei*

In his picture of the perfect city, which wanders over the Earth and has its true domain in heaven, Augustine referred in his own way to an ancient idea known from Seneca’s *Letter* 68.2. Seneca divided human-kind into two groups, however, the juxtaposition of these two human communities is essentially a Stoic idea and is not a component of the history of salvation²⁷.

The motif of the two communities, believers and unbelievers, which are nearing the end of their days, with the former heading for God and the latter for punishment, can of course be found in the Bible as well²⁸. Augustine himself had already made references to those biblical topics circa 390, when he wrote the treatise *On True Religion*²⁹. Later, around 400, in the treatise *On the Catechizing of the Uninstructed* the two peoples changed into two cities³⁰. Augustine’s *Literal Meaning of Genesis*³¹, which was compiled between 401 and 415, contained similar ideas on the two cities. He discussed this topic even more elaborately in the *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*³². In his bibli-cal reflections Augustine discussed the foundation or the origins of the two Cities – the notion of the two antithetical loves which impel human actions. He referred to the topic of persecution and consolation, to the manifestation of the works of love and egoism, and finally

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²⁶ A. Trapè, *Introduzione generale. Teologia...*, XXVI–XXX.
²⁹ Augustinus, *De vera religione* 27,50: NBA 6/1, 80.82.
³⁰ Augustinus, *De catechzandis rudibus* 19,31: NBA 7/2, 248.
³¹ Augustinus, *De Genesi ad litteram* 11,15.20: NBA 9/2, 582.
to the ultimate goal in the pilgrimage of the two juxtaposed Cities: happiness and misery.\(^{33}\)

Creating the antithesis of the two Cities, Augustine referred to Ps 45,5–6; 47,2–3.9; 86,3–6; and to Mt 6,19–24; 12,25–45; 25,31–46; J 1,10–13; 3,17–21; 15,16–18; J 2,13–23; 5,17–20; Hbr 11,12–16; Ap 3,12; 18,10; 21,2.\(^{34}\) He alluded to these biblical motifs to claim that in the New Testament the human race is divided into two antagonistic communities, cities, in pursuit of their respective ‘happiness’. Those who choose the City of God do so for the love of God, carried to the point of self-denial. It is a good, organized love, compliant with the eternal Law and its result is peace (\textit{tranquillitas ordinis}).\(^{36}\) The two loves are mutually antithetical; the love of God, which is a social love, and a love of justice, which is the very opposite of self-love, is an espousal of injustice.\(^{37}\) On the other hand, those who choose the other city do so for self-love, which can be brought to the point of contempt for God\(^{38}\) and is a selfish, biased, and rebellious love.\(^{39}\) The former love follows God and is guided by Christ. It will attain eternal salvation (\textit{civitas Dei}), whereas the latter which adheres to Satan, is heading for eternal damnation (\textit{civitas terrena}). Both of the Cities are based on the principle of the development of opposing loves. The City of God takes pride in God, the spirit of service permeates it, it puts its trust in God, it has wisdom, it loves God and worships Him. The Earthly City takes pride only in itself; it is permeated by the spirit of self-indulgence, it puts trust in its own strength and deems itself wise but does not love God and does not worship him.\(^{40}\) The citizens of the

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\(^{34}\) Augustinus, \textit{De civitate Dei} 11,1: NBA 5/2, 66.68.


\(^{37}\) Augustinus, \textit{De Genesi ad litteram} 11,15.20: NBA 9/2, 582; \textit{De civitate Dei} 12,2: NBA 5/2, 150,152; \textit{De libero arbitrio} 2,19.53: NBA 3/2, 276.278; \textit{De Trinitate} 12,9.14: NBA 4,482.

\(^{38}\) Augustinus, \textit{De civitate Dei} 14,28: NBA 5/2, 360.362.

\(^{39}\) Augustinus, \textit{De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus Manichaeorum} 1,26.48: NBA 13/1, 78; \textit{Epistula} 155,4.15: NBA 22,576; \textit{De Genesi ad litteram} 11,15.20: NBA 9/2, 582.

\(^{40}\) Augustinus, \textit{De civitate Dei} 14,28: NBA 5/2, 360.362.
City of God are guided by humility, whereas the citizens of the City of the World are driven by pride\textsuperscript{41}. The citizens of the City of God live in accordance with the spirit, i.e. in accordance with God, while the citizens of the Earthly City follow the body, i.e. purely human principles\textsuperscript{42}. The essence of the history of the world lies in the incessant struggle between the two cities. This division is actually earlier and more elementary. It is a division of rational beings into two groups: those for and those against God. The origin of this antithesis goes back to the first man, and in Augustine’s opinion is manifested in every human through the legacy of original sin\textsuperscript{43}.

Augustine took the idea of the City of God from Ps 45,5; Ps 47,2–3. 9; Ps 86,3\textsuperscript{44}, where it was used to refer to the luminous, heavenly Jerusalem as the opposite of the dark satanic Babylon\textsuperscript{45}. The citizens of the City of God are the children of God of all time (\textit{communio sanctorum}), the community of the devout and the redeemed, from Seth, through the Patriarchs, and the Old Testament Prophets, to the Saints of the age of the Parousia. The love of God is the foundation of the City of God. It is built upon divine grace. Its citizens do works of mercy. The \textit{Communio improborum} constitutes its opposite. It consists of evil people of all time and it is founded upon self-love, and built on human nature corrupted by sin. Its citizens are the vessels of anger. Both of the cities have been in existence since the beginning of human history. Just as the Heavenly City (\textit{civitas coelestis}) is not equivalent solely to the Church, but to all the good and just people of the human community, the Earthly City (\textit{civitas terrena}) is not equivalent to a historical secular city, but denotes every unethical human community, including pagan communities or paganism in general\textsuperscript{46}.

\textsuperscript{41} Augustinus, \textit{De civitate Dei} 14,13,1: NBA 5/2, 326.328.330.
\textsuperscript{42} Augustinus, \textit{De civitate Dei} 14,4: NBA 5/2, 296.298.
\textsuperscript{44} Augustinus, \textit{De civitate Dei} 11,1: NBA 5/2, 66.68.
Augustine categorized world history into seven ages: (1.) from the Creation till the time of the Flood; (2.) from the period of the Flood to Abraham; (3.) from Abraham to David; (4.) from David to the end of the Babylonian Captivity; (5.) from the end of the Babylonian Captivity to the advent of Christ; (6.) from the first coming of Jesus Christ to the Parousia; (7.) from the Parousia to eternity. The first six are periods of the terrestrial world and the seventh is to mark the entrance to eternity.

Cain and Abel are the prototypical representatives of the opposing cities. Cain, by his fratricide, is a prototypical citizen of the civitas terrena. Abel, his innocent victim, is the prototypical citizen of the civitas Dei. Seth is synonymous with the just individual who puts his trust in God. The descendants of Cain and Seth, the unjust and just of their time, create opposing communities up to the time of Abraham. Most of God’s promises have been fulfilled since the times of Abraham, especially since the appointment of Israel as the Chosen People, the instrument for the fulfilment of those promises. The history of Salvation and of God’s promises was handed down by the Prophets to the time of Jesus Christ. The history of Salvation in Augustine’s writings, which were based on the Bible, also had an apologetic meaning. By the choice of this theme, Augustine wanted to demonstrate to the pagans that the story of Salvation, the prophecies about Jesus, the mission of the Church, and the laws governing the City of God were not invented by Christians.

Jesus is presented by Augustine as the perfect intermediary between God and mankind: as God, He is just and immortal, as a human he is subject to death and weakness. Through the perfect union of the divine

47 Augustinus, De civitate Dei 12,28.2: NBA 5/2, 214.
48 Augustinus, De civitate Dei 22,30.5: NBA 5/3, 420.
49 Augustinus, De civitate Dei 22,30.5: NBA 5/3, 420.
50 Augustinus, De civitate Dei 11,8: NBA 5/2, 80.
51 Augustinus, De civitate Dei 15,1–12: NBA 5/2, 376.378; Ibid. 15,4: NBA 5/2, 382.384; Ibid. 15,18: NBA 5/2, 424.426.
52 Augustinus, De civitate Dei 16,1–11: NBA 5/2, 462–494.
53 Augustinus, De civitate Dei 16,12: NBA 5/2, 494.496.
54 Augustinus, De civitate Dei 18,46: NBA 5/2, 742.744.
55 Cf.: A. Trapè, Introduzione generale. Teologia..., LXX.
and human nature in one person. He is the only intermediary of Salvation\footnote{Augustinus, \textit{De civitate Dei} 9,13.3: NBA 5/1, 646–650; \textit{Ibid}. 10,32.2: NBA 5/1, 764–766; \textit{Ibid}. 21.15: NBA 5/3, 254.}. Only by the mediation and revelation of God Incarnate can mankind accede to the Heavenly Jerusalem\footnote{Augustinus, \textit{De civitate Dei} 10,25: NBA 5/1, 738–742; \textit{Ibid}. 18.47: NBA 5/2, 744–746.}. Christ is the perfect priest and the perfect sacrifice, which He offers exclusively to God\footnote{Augustinus, \textit{De civitate Dei} 1,35: NBA 5/1, 84.}. 

With the first coming of Christ on the Earth and the establishment of His Church, the City of God manifests itself in the history of mankind not only spiritually but also institutionally. The Church in the concept of the City of God denotes an institutional entity\footnote{Augustinus, \textit{De civitate Dei} 18,51: NBA 5/2, 752–754.}, which gives rise to a communion of sacraments, however, is not yet an eschatological communion of saints\footnote{Augustinus, \textit{De civitate Dei} 21.4–5: NBA 5/3, 168–172.}. The Church of Christ is also a community of believers on pilgrimage to God in the course of their earthly life\footnote{Augustinus, \textit{De civitate Dei} 15,4: NBA 5/2, 382–384.}. This pilgrimage leads to the eschatological Church, the Church of the predestined, of the Saints only\footnote{Augustinus, \textit{De civitate Dei} 18,51–52: NBA 5/2, 750–756.}. The Earthly City exists contemporaneously to the City of God, but its role is more and more ambivalent. At times it supports the City of God, providing the earthly goods, as its own goods, especially by pursuing peace\footnote{Augustinus, \textit{De civitate Dei} 19,26: NBA 5/3, 84.}. At other times it is at war with the City of God, instigating persecutions, schisms or heresies, yet paradoxically at the same time it allows for the emergence of heroic martyrs, righteous saints, and wise scholars\footnote{Augustinus, \textit{De civitate Dei} 10,4–6: NBA 5/1, 690–696; \textit{Ibid}. 10,20: NBA 5/1, 730; \textit{Ibid}. 10,25: NBA 5/1, 738–742.}.

Augustine’s division of world history into seven ages alludes to the biblical story of the creation of the world in seven days, as well as, to Augustine’s psychology of the individual’s spiritual development through seven stages. In the first age, it is the Earthly City that dominates. In the second age, the City of God becomes limited to the family of Abraham. In the third age, the monarchies of the ancient Orient rise and fall. In the fourth age, Greece plays the key role. It the fifth age, the world
witnesses the rise of Rome. In the sixth age, Christianity spreads and the human soul makes direct contact with God through Christ. The whole of mankind is granted a return to the Kingdom of God, the Church assists in the development of all that, which belongs to the Kingdom of God. Holiness is the greatest good of all humanity, it leads to eternal happiness and to the communion of the Saints with God (civitas beata, communio sanctorum). Finally, in the seventh age, the faithful who are saved are to attain eternal happiness, whereas the unfaithful, the damned, will be condemned to eternal damnation.

Until the time of the Parousia the sanctified life will be imperfect, transitory, and will be continually challenged by moral turpitude. Through the synthesis of the Christian doctrine of resurrection, Augustine teaches that it is a truth derived from the Bible. He also argues for the resurrection of the human body against the Platonist. It is not until the seventh age, after the Day of Judgement, that the City of God will become the community of rational beings who are perfect and finally united with God. The citizens of the City of God of all time should not care about worldly power in the Earthly City because their proper goal is to develop the Kingdom of God in the worldly community, in which they happen to live. In the seventh age the citizens of the Earthly City will suffer eternal punishment, as they have repudiated God’s commandment of love and depraved themselves. Their punishment will correspond to the gravity of their evil. In contrast, the citizens of the City of God will enjoy heavenly bliss, rest, and peace in God – without the presence of any evil or fatigue but with the

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70 Augustinus, De civitate Dei 22,5: NBA 5/3, 316.318.
72 Augustinus, De civitate Dei 14,11: NBA 5/2, 320–326; Ibid. 21,12: NBA 5/3, 248.250.
73 Augustinus, De civitate Dei 11,23: NBA 5/2, 108–112.
satisfaction of all their desires. They will love, see, and contemplate God. The citizens of the City of God will enjoy the triumph of truth, dignity in holiness, peace in happiness and eternal life.

Conclusions

Augustine’s concept of the history of Salvation introduced in *De civitate Dei* did not have much influence on later Christian theological concepts. Paradoxically though Peter Lombard, and later Thomas Aquinas, referred to Augustine’s idea of history as “uti et frui” or the development of evil in the human community, far more often but these topics had already been discussed by Augustine in *De doctrina Christiana*. Most likely Augustine managed neither to dispel anti-Christian resentments with his theses, nor to inspire greater faith and joy in Christians. St Thomas Aquinas also employed apologetic theses which referred to the need of divine authority for the individual’s accession to the knowledge of the truth. He also understood the idea of God’s intervention in the history of man through miracles and prophecies. The theological issues of *De civitate Dei* met with even greater response in later theological thought: God as the Creator and the Donor of grace; the origin of evil or the abuse of freedom; the struggle between good and evil; the triumph of good over evil and Christ as exclusive mediator. Augustine’s antithesis of the two Cities and two opposing loves, which rule over human history is still valid because it is based on the observation of the earthly world and on daily experience.

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76 Augustinus, *De civitate Dei* 22,30,4: NBA 5/3, 418.420.